A MAN NEEDS A DOG

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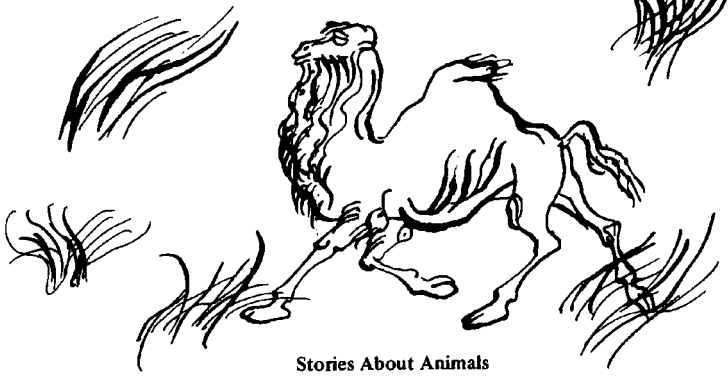

Stories About Animals

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Illustrated by *Victor Duvidov*

ЧЕЛОВЕКУ НУЖНА СОБАКА

Рассказы о животных

На английском языке

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IN LIEU OF A FOREWORD*

Does a man really need a dog? It's hardly one of those global questions mankind is concerned with today. And yet...

The compilers of this collection decided to open it with Mukhtar Auezov's "Fierce Grey", a gem of Soviet short-story writing. This wise and harsh story provides a scale, as it were, to measure the problem of Man and Animal against the overall disturbing problem of Man and Life. In this story the abortive friendship between a boy and a wolf, in its bloody, tragic consummation, presents the man-animal relationship in a kind of objective balance. And even though the men prove stronger than the wolf, this cruel strife reminds us that Nature takes revenge on Man for interference and destruction. Of course, the humanist content of Auezov's story-parable is not confined to this thesis. But the compilers assigned it the role of an orchestral overture, shall we say, after which the theme can be developed in its various facets—love and hate, falsehood and sincerity, callousness and sensitivity, selfishness and

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devotion, kind- and hard-heartedness. In short, Man's various traits which colour his relations with his fellow-creatures. In the final count, a discussion of Man's attitude to Nature and animals inevitably involves the problem of his inner essence and worth, of how reasonable and humane he is to the living things around him and, consequently, to himself. This inherent bond between Man and the world of animate and inanimate things he lives in is whimsically and at the same time poetically expressed by the prominent Estonian writer Jüri Tuulik in his long story "Homecoming", which concludes this collection. In a burlesque manner, seemingly out to shock the reader, the hero of the story, a fisherman from the island of Abruka, off the Estonian coast of the Baltic, tells about the death of his dog and about the monument he intends to erect to his four-legged friend. In the course of the story the narrator changes his initial plan and begins to visualize the monument as a kind of sculptural group including both dog and man, and also embracing the land on which he stands, the sea which feeds him, the sun which warms him and the pines which sway over his head. This metaphor, the reader will surely agree, is both vivid and hopeful.

No, we are not going to discuss the plot of every story in the collection. It is futile to try and render in a few words the wealth of thought and feeling, the individual vision and style of the contributing authors whose brief biographies the reader will find at the end of the book.

Fierce Grey*

Although the big ravine near Black Hill seemed deserted, it was well known to the shepherds of the surrounding auls. Misfortune quite often came from this ravine.

Black Hill, like with a fur hat, was covered with low growing bushes. The ravine was densely overgrown with dogrose, and beneath its prickly thick carpeting were hidden wolves' lairs.

A chilly May breeze blew fitfully from the ravine, carrying with it the fragrance of young grass and wild onion. The bushes stirred and rustled sombrely and drily, as if they were whispering among themselves.

Late in the spring a wolf and his mate came to the

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ravine to their old lair. The old lairs had been washed out by flood water, and now a man could easily crawl into them. The wolves dug up a new, more compact lair nearby and connected it with the old by narrow and dark burrows.

Wolves' paws soon trampled down the freshly-dug earth. The she-wolf's whitish coat hadn't even finished shedding when smoky-grey cubs appeared in the den.

One quiet morning the she-wolf lay torpidly in the full blaze of the sun, beneath the high panicles of sorrel. The spot was sheltered from the wind, and she drowsed, overcome by the heat, from time to time half-opening a lackluster eye. Her flanks were sunken in, her udder swollen with milk. The fur on her back twitched nervously, her nipples quivered incessantly.

A faint crackle echoed from behind the bushes. The she-wolf jumped up, sending white clumps of fur flying up from the ground. Baring her teeth, she let out a low growl. The cubs floundered at her feet.

The next moment the carcass of a lamb came flying across the thick wall of spreading branches and landed with a thud in front of the she-wolf. A large, heavily-built wolf came bounding out silently, his tail drooping low to the ground. He sniffed the she-wolf, reddish froth dripping from his muzzle, and she greedily licked his bloodied chops.

The lamb was still breathing. The wolf and his mate threw themselves upon it and in a minute's time had torn it to pieces. Two white-toothed voracious jaws devoured the light, tender meat in large chunks. Green eyes glittered malevolently.

Having devoured every scrap of the lamb, the wolves

lazed in the succulent, fragrant grass, stretching themselves out full length. Then they began taking turns belching up the swallowed meat.

The cubs crawled one by one towards the meat and pushing one another and growling, began to toss it about. Only two, the last born, were still blind. The she-wolf dragged them to her and pushed them to her nipples.

The next day, when the sun was at its zenith, the she-wolf caught the heavy smell of horses in the distance. Quickly shoving the cubs into the lair, she hid herself in the bushes.

There were sounds of people's voices, the stamping of horses' hooves.

The people rode right up to the den and dismounted. Long shepherds' cudgels struck sharply against the earth.

The she-wolf stood in the dogrose on the steep slope of the ravine, her tongue dangling from her open jaw. She could see everything.

Throwing stout leather ropes over the necks of the cubs, the men dragged them one by one from the dark lair. They killed off five of them right out. They broke the hind legs of one and flung it beside the gnawed head of the lamb. The cub would crawl, and whimper, and the wolves would carry it off, not to return to these parts for a long time. The runt of the litter the people carried off with them.

The clatter of horses' hooves faded from the ravine. The mature wolf with the dark crest on its back and the white she-wolf approached the motionless cub and bared their teeth savagely at it, then at one another.

The she-wolf snatched up the cub and made her way up along the ravine. The male followed with great, springing bounds.

The lair was left deserted.

In the aul there lived a young boy called Kurmash. It was he who adopted the still sightless cub as a pet. The elders said: the grey cub was brought among people before it even opened its eyes—perhaps it'll grow up tame.

Kurmash never left the cub's side; he prepared a clean saucer for him and a soft leather collar.

In two days' time the cub opened its eyes, but did not venture out of the yurt—from outside came the sound of barking and the terrible stench of dogs. At night Kurmash would place the cub next to him under the covers. The boy now slept separately from his old grandmother, whom he loved more than anyone else on earth.

She was the only person who looked disapprovingly upon his attachment to the weak, transparent-grey little beast with sharp teeth.

"He couldn't see yet, and he had already grown fangs," Grandmother said. "As soon as he can stand on his feet, he'll flatten back his ears like all wolves do."

And the boy grew angry at her.

By mid-summer the cub had grown big and strong and was almost indistinguishable from the other aul pups the same age. If he were a little bit shaggier he could have passed for a young wolfhound. But living in the aul was like being in captivity for him. Just like old

Grandmother, the shepherds' dogs would not accept him, and he was met by the growling and gnashing of teeth every time he ventured out of the yurt.

Kurmash would beat them off, and the devoted watchdogs would slink away snarling, their pride wounded. But the yurt was crowded, stuffy and boring for the cub. He longed for the steppe, the tall, many-coloured grasses, the unexplored expanses.

Once the full-grown skewbald hound from the Big Yurt seized an opportunity when the boy was not there and drove the cub from his yurt, and mauled him for quite some time. The other dogs rushed over and began sinking their teeth into the grey cub's legs and sides barking frenziedly. Children and adults came running, and barely managed to extricate the cub. Tattered, badly bitten, the cub crawled off towards the yurt, sat down with his back to it and soundlessly bared his white-toothed jaws.

"Not a whimper... He's a proud one! " the men marvelled. "A pup would have rent the ground by now with its wailing."

But the women said:

"He's a thief! That's why he's so quiet."

And they were right. Even Kurmash was amazed and alarmed by the cub's voracious appetite. The boy fed him much better than the dogs. But the cub never seemed to be able to get his fill.

The aul dogs were lean and undemanding. The cub's flanks and chest filled out, and the back of his neck got noticeably fatter. But he was continually hungry and kept sniffing and poking about the yurt with his moist, black nose.

When a person was around, the cub would not touch the food, turning his muzzle away. But as soon as he walked away, the cub would instantly devour everything placed before him, and would then stare longingly at the empty bowl, as if he hadn't eaten a thing. When nobody was looking, he greedily seized everything that had been left carelessly lying within his range. He would drag off boiled meat set out for the master, lap up yoghurt from the copper pot, gnaw on fresh hides, hung up to dry on the wooden frame of the yurt.

He was often caught red-handed, and thrashed unmercifully. He came to know the blows of the rolling pin, which made his head buzz, and the sharp, burning pain from the hissing lash. Dodging agilely, he would silently bare his white fangs. But not once did he ever give voice to his pain.

Meanwhile, rumours crept through the aul that at night, undetected by the dogs, he had been making his way into the sheep-pens and sniffing the lambs, and that the sheep were afraid of him. Someone had seen him stealing stealthily away into the steppe.

Kurmash refused to listen to the aul gossip. But no matter how hard the boy tried, how he remonstrated with his pet, the cub could not understand why the food he stole was any worse than that which they offered him.

He did not fear Kurmash, and ate in his presence. When the boy offered him some meat, the cub would not take it gently, but would snatch it out of his hands. But Kurmash never once gave him the taste of the stick which he used to drive off the dogs. The boy

admired the cub, his sullen, independent stare, the menacing ruff of darkening fur on his neck, his stubborn strength which was growing with every passing day.

And Kurmash named his pet Kokserek, which means Fierce Grey.

By the end of the summer Fierce Grey bore little resemblance to the aul dogs. Long-legged like a calf, as steep-backed as a bull, he outstripped them all. He did not lift his tail up like a dog, and thereby appeared even taller, and his neck and back resembled a drawn bow.

He no longer ran from the skewbald hound and the dogs stopped provoking him. He had only to turn his high-domed, stone-grey head towards them and curl his upper lip for the dogs to run helter-skelter. Usually, when they caught sight of him, they would stick together in a pack. And both he and they were always on guard.

No one had ever seen the wolf playing about in the aul. Nor did he play with Kurmash. He knew his name well and came running when Kurmash or old Grandmother would call him, but he ran unhurriedly, at a lazy lope, and did not wag his tail.

He did not touch the dogs, did not respond to their barking, nor try to pursue them as they ran away. Most often he lay in the shade of the yurt, his sharp ears pricked up, gloomily squinting his green eyes.

Kurmash took pride in his taciturn, green-eyed pet and laughed merrily when the neighbors' dogs took to their heels with squeals of fright. If the truth were to be known, the boy himself was sometimes a bit afraid

of Fierce Grey, but he would never have admitted it, not even to old Grandmother.

The master of the skewbald hound bragged:

"What's so great about your hang-tailed cur! My hound would make short work of him if he had half a chance! He would have finished him off long ago if we hadn't pulled him off."

Once passing by, just to see what would happen, he set his hound on Fierce Grey. Without a second's hesitation the hound had thrown himself upon the wolf with furious barking and sank his teeth into the wolf's shoulder. He had aimed for the neck, but missed his mark. At the last moment the wolf dodged aside and before the hound had a chance to jump away, silently, in a bound, seized him by the ruff of the neck and flung him onto the ground. The enormous hound rolled down a hillock like a fat, helpless sheep. The wolf also missed his mark, for he would have torn out the hound's throat.

Kurmash ran out and called back Fierce Grey, and the master drove off his skewbald hound.

Later in the evening two wolves attacked the sheep which grazed near the aul.

The shepherd raised a frantic cry, and the men and older boys came galloping on horseback from the aul. All the aul dogs came tearing along to the rescue with deafening barking, and Fierce Grey came too.

The wolves slipped back into the steppe. They chased after them, but to no avail.

The riders and dogs came to a halt at the near hills. In the distance, on the high crest of Black Hill, two grey shadows glided in the dim light.

"They're early this year," the shepherd said.

And Kurmash was the only one who noticed Fierce Grey silently setting out along the wolves' tracks, his muzzle almost down to the ground.

The boy fell behind the rest and headed fearlessly on foot into the darkness, towards Black Hill. He called coaxingly for a long time:

"Kokserek! Kok-se-rek..."

But Fierce Grey did not return.

The wolf showed up in the aul that night. Stopping in front of his yurt, he unhurriedly scratched the dry, trampled earth with his iron claws, raising up clouds of dust. He lifted his head towards the starry sky and inhaled the cold autumnal air, greedily sniffing in the faint puffs of wind coming from Black Hill.

He spent the next day in the aul, but when night came he headed once again for the steppe.

He returned three days later, emaciated, hunger-ravaged, but just as sullen as before and without his collar. When Kurmash called him, he walked over, his head lowered almost threateningly. The boy threw his arms around his short, muscular neck happily. The wolf tore itself away, its ears flattened, but even Grandmother refrained from scolding him and bustled around preparing his food.

He ate with savage fury, and Kurmash backed off and watched from a distance.

"Aha! The wolf in him is beginning to show," Kurmash's father said. "The creature's eyes are the greenest of green—they even glow in the daytime. It's time we did away with him, son."

And the boy shuddered, afraid that the adults would

no longer let him have his way, that they could destroy his wolf.

But Fierce Grey seemed to understand that they were saying about him. The moment they turned their backs he was gone. No one saw him leaving the aul. For many days afterwards Kurmash searched for him in the thickets, calling in a voice, now filled with anguish, now with threat. But all in vain! The windy autumn passed, and the severe winter blanketed the steppe with white felt. Fierce Grey did not return.

Until late autumn he subsisted on young hares, far from his home territory, and was not above catching mice. He feasted on fat gophers with the relish of a fox. But once the snow came, hunger drove him to people's winter quarters, to the sheep pens.

Now he slunk around stealthily, like he had never belonged. His fur bristled whenever he caught sight of people.

Night after night he circled around, dodging along snow-covered hills, leaving the quicksilver traces of heel and claws on the snow. Steam swirled up from his slightly wrinkled grey muzzle. He would stop upwind, and the heavy smell of the cattle shed and livestock would assail his nostrils, while the dogs' anxious barking would hit his ears. The wolf savagely gnashed his fangs. Now the dogs were just as keen-nosed as he was hungry.

In the dead of a blizzardy night he attempted to approach the sheds. But the restless dogs seemed to know where he was coming from. He was met by the

whole pack, led by the skewbald hound, and driven away.

The wind died down, and the ground began to freeze. The wolf shifted around, squatting on his hind legs. The hard crust of ice over the snow burned his heels, the black corners of his mouth froze, hunger pangs pinched his belly. The wolf loped up the hill. The snow sparkled in the bright moonlight. Fierce Grey threw his head up towards the sky and, frozen in a convulsive languor, never before experienced, let out a long, protracted, melancholy howl.

Frenzied barking immediately flared up in the aul.

Fierce Grey did not lower his head. All of a sudden from distant Black Hill there came an indistinct, melancholy echo. The wolf straightened up, quivering. Someone was echoing him, luring him. He listened intently, and then thrust his nose forward and ran swiftly towards the call.

At the descent to the large ravine he stopped, wary, trembling from the bitter cold. A snow-white she-wolf descended towards him from Black Hill.

Fierce Grey did not allow her to come near him. As she came closer, he bounded aside, his teeth bared, ears pinned back. But he was unable to leave. And when she followed in his tracks, sniffing him, and then turned with a plaintive yelping and thrust her warm nose into his groin, he remained perfectly still. The she-wolf ran quietly off. He caught up with her and licked her cheek.

Shoulder to shoulder they set out upwards along the ravine, traversed it, and then made for the people's dwellings. In a half hour's time they set down a gigan-

tic semicircle of rare double tracks along the crests of the hills, and only the ice-covering crunched resonantly beneath their paws, as they ran tirelessly on and on. Then, as if they had come to an agreement, they raced, side by side, down towards the aul.

The moon had set. The night was drawing to an end. Fierce Grey and the white she-wolf flew like a whirlwind through the aul, and both saw a shaggy, long-haired hound come tearing out towards them from the yellowish snowdrift by the sheepfold, drawing the entire pack along behind him. This, of course, was the skewbald hound.

The wolves tore at full speed out of the aul. The hound kept pace with a strained, violent barking. The pack straggled out behind him. And Fierce Grey slowed his gallop, listening maliciously to the barking—the hound was bursting with rage.

Near a hollow the pack came to a halt, and the skewbald hound also ran back towards the pack. The she-wolf went after him first.

In the deserted steppe it is difficult for a dog to evade a wolf. But the hound showed no sign of fear, even though he was alone. The purpose of his life was to fight the wolf, and he tackled the she-wolf without hesitation. Then Fierce Grey fell upon him, crushing him underneath. With a high-pitched snarl the she-wolf bit into the hound's throat.

Soon the only thing left of the enormous hound were his tail, his gnawed head and a few sparse tufts of black and white fur. The wolves even lapped up the bloodied snow.

Having eaten their fill, they trotted back towards

Black Hill and lazed on the untouched snow in the ravine.

From that night on they were inseparable. And a grey misfortune began to stalk the district.

Here and there, near Black Hill and far away, the wolves killed sheep, slaughtered cows and horses, brought down camels, destroyed the best watchdogs and slipped away with impunity.

The alarming news spread from aul to aul.

"There's a whole pack of them, the grey devils, and like werewolves, none of them are afraid of people. Not the least bit! The leader stands as tall as a calf, and is terribly strong and fearsome... He doesn't run even when a person comes near him! You're afraid to approach him. The pack attacks from one direction, the shepherds rush over, the dogs take after them, and meanwhile the leader comes from the other side and carries off a ewe on his back..."

The wolves never stayed long in one place. One day they would be spotted near Black Hill, the next, ten, fifteen or twenty miles to the south or east. It is just as they say: a wolf's belly is only as full as its legs are strong and fast.

The steppe in that part of the country was hilly, abounding in ravines and overgrown with bushes. It was a wonderful sight from Black Hill: it arched with its high banks and churned with shaggy crests. Such places were well suited for the wolf, but made life quite difficult for the shepherd. It was a simple matter for the wolf to make its way undetected towards the herd or the pen, easy to lie in wait and to cut off an animal which straggled off. And it was hard to track

down the grey phantom, impossible to guess from which corner his smoky shadow would spring out. And in winter you might be able to follow his tracks, but you still couldn't catch him! The snowdrifts were deep. The layer of ice over the snow would support a wolf's weight, but not a horse and rider's. A horse kept falling through and just ploughed up the snow.

At the big ravine where they had found wolves' lairs more than once, they tried setting out poisoned meat, only to regret it later. Would werewolves take poison? The young half-witted aul dogs found the meat by the ravine and there their bodies remained lying. The wolves would have no part of the stiffened dogs' carcasses either.

That winter the wolves ate their fill. Fierce Grey grew and broadened out, but as before he could never satisfy his terrible hunger for meat and blood.

Only towards spring did his hunger seem to subside somewhat, and for a short time another hunger raged in his blood.

The snow in the steppe grew soft and turned dark. Ragged thawed patches appeared on the hills, baring the reddish, clayey earth.

Fierce Grey was overcome by an unprecedented playfulness. On the run he would circle and rush around the she-wolf like a puppy. She would lie down to rest and he would dance up nearby, raising up whirlwinds of sparkling snow, and jump foolishly over her, shoving her with his chest, paws and muzzle. She would snap angrily, but he would take her by the neck and hold her for a moment before releasing her. Sometimes he would pull her about by the scruff of the

neck for quite a while. She would squeal shrewishly and bite.

Then she grew more gentle and began to sniff and lick him more often.

North of Black Hill lay broad, shallow, saltwater lakes. Their banks were densely overgrown with rushes and reeds. These were wild, uninhabited places—no wonder the raucous cries of birds resounded constantly above the thickets. It was to this spot that the white she-wolf led Fierce Grey in the spring, when the lake banks had turned a lush green.

Now he hunted far from his native haunts. The she-wolf did not leave the lair and fed upon birds' eggs found among the rushes.

Once he brought her a sheep's rump, but this time she was not there to greet him beside the lair as usual. He agitatedly scraped the earth with his paws, and she crawled out of the lair, weakened, barely dragging her legs.

A powerful, unfamiliar smell emanated from the lair. Fierce Grey gnashed his teeth menacingly, shoved his muzzle into the lair and pulled out a shaky, unprepossessing cub.

Yelping weakly, the she-wolf rushed towards him, but could not stop him. Fierce Grey beat the small blind cub against the earth until it was only a formless grey mass, and then flung it away with disgust.

When he turned back to the she-wolf, she was lying between him and the lair, and more cubs were crawling towards her, seeking her nipples.

Fierce Grey lay down off to the side, licking his chops morosely.

The she-wolf began to hunt with him again, but she was still sluggish and clumsy and ran continually back to her litter. Very often they would return to the lair after an unsuccessful hunt and he would look longingly at the cubs. She would nip him and drive him from the lair.

One early April morning, when the cubs had already opened their eyes, Fierce Grey and the white she-wolf were running along the lake to their lair, she—ahead, not allowing him to overtake her, he—right at her tail. Suddenly they scented humans. The birds swarmed in great clouds up above their nests, horses' hooves clattered, shepherds' clubs struck against the earth... The wolves hid among the reeds until everything had grown quiet once more. Then, stealing up to the lair, they found there only one cub with broken legs.

For several days the she-wolf roamed persistently around the aul, where the humans had taken her other cubs. Fierce Grey called to her in vain. She would not go to him—and they were noticed.

The earth had dried up and flowered. Grazing on the succulent spring grasses, the horses quickly picked up strength. And one warm, cloudless day the wolves heard a noisy pursuit behind them. Three riders on lightning-fast horses drove the wolves from the big ravine by Black Hill.

Fierce Grey flew like an arrow. Even in the ravine the she-wolf lagged behind him. Her nipples had not yet dried up, and she was heavy on the run. At first Fierce Grey turned back and ran up behind her, nipping her sides and urging her on. She began to growl at him. He looked back at the riders and silently,

swiftly shot forward.

At the end of the ravine he turned sharply and with great springing leaps, like a mountain goat, bounded upwards along the steep side of the ravine overgrown with prickly dogrose.

Fierce Grey hid in the bushes, but the white she-wolf rushed straight across an open space, and the riders went galloping after her, whooping and hollering.

That night Fierce Grey, snorting, trotted warily along the tracks of the hunt. In a distant hollow on grass damp with dew he found a patch of dried blood. He sniffed, licked it. Here had lain the white she-wolf and here her scent ended.

Fierce Grey sat on his haunches and remained motionless, tensing his bulging chest, hunching his brown neck, until the moon rose in the sky. And then he howled, low and mournfully.

As if turned to stone, Fierce Grey sat in the hollow until morning. Just before dawn he rose, yawning spasmodically. Hunger had turned his belly cold.

All summer long he roamed about the steppe alone, striking fear in the herds and auls. The night brigandage never stopped, and the shepherds cursed their fate. There seemed to be only this single grey wolf with brown markings on his back, which roamed by Black Hill, near the salt lakes and all around, yet in one summer's time it had slaughtered no less than half a hundred lambs and calves! His belly was a bottomless pit.

Twice they came in pursuit on fresh horses with a pack of swift dogs, and both times he managed to escape them. With his heavy belly the brigand was light

on his feet, and tireless. The wolf did not run, but fairly flew away, putting the fleet horses to shame.

During the day he hid, slept in the dark tangled thickets of rushes at the marshy lakes, but at night nothing stopped him—neither a man's shout, the dogs' barking, nor the thunder and fire of a rifle shot. In vain the shepherds wasted cartridge after cartridge, aiming at the grey shadow. The shots whistled wildly over the flocks, and the echo had barely faded in the black gloom before the wolf was back, unscathed.

Fierce Grey filled out in the course of the summer. His thick coarse fur stood erect, but his belly was drawn and knew not a moment's peace.

He took to going after herds of mares with their young. He would slip stealthily up towards a young foal, seize it by its short tail and hold it. The foal would struggle violently to break itself loose; the wolf would suddenly set it free, and it would go rolling head over heels. Then the wolf would attack, and its claws would close over the victim's throat.

The autumn flew by quickly with its bad weather and once again snow storms would howl for days on end and blanket the steppe.

One bright, frosty night Fierce Grey unexpectedly encountered a large wolf pack on the bare crest of a hill. Sweeping up a whirlwind of prickly snow dust, the pack flew towards him and surrounded him. Fierce Grey found himself nose to nose with the leader—an enormous, experienced brute with clouds of frosted vapour coming from his bared jaws.

But the pack understood from the first that they had encountered not another victim, but the master of

these parts. Dropping to his haunches, his tail tucked beneath his legs, Fierce Grey gnashed his iron fangs. He was half as young as the leader, but was his equal in both height and weight; none of the others in the pack had such high, smooth flanks.

The females were the first to approach and begin sniffing Fierce Grey. Then the younger males made their way cautiously towards him. But he did not allow himself to be sniffed by the leader, and the two held each other at a distance. The newcomers lay down on a mound of firmly packed snow and began swallowing bits of frozen ice. Fierce Grey joined them. And he left with the pack, keeping pace with the leader.

A blizzard started up towards morning. Fierce Grey led the pack to a herd of horses. They cut off a two-year-old mare, drove her into a deep snowdrift, and Fierce Grey brought her down, as he had once brought down the skewbald hound. The wolves fell upon the horse from all sides. Fierce Grey seized hold of the shoulder, as was his custom, only to jump back from a dull blow of fangs in his side. The leader stood beside him, gnashing his teeth: Fierce Grey had touched his, the most honored part of the kill.

However, there was no time for fighting at the moment—the mare's carcass was melting away. The younger wolves sank their heads up to their ears into the mare's belly. The she-wolves tore chunks of meat, shoving each other and snarling. Fierce Grey and the leader returned to the tight circle.

The last hind leg was left to them. The others drew a respectable distance away and lay watching, their heads on their paws, as the two tore up the meat,

gnawing and crunching on the bones. Both walked away at the same time, breathing heavily, with bellicose sideway glances at one another, their muzzles smeared in blood up to their eyes.

They lay down separately in the center of the pack. The she-wolves circled around Fierce Grey. He did not take his green eyes off the old leader.

They led the pack together for another few nights, keeping pace neck to neck, and if one were to pull a half-step ahead, the other immediately sank its teeth into its side or leg.

The nights were clear, windless, hunger-filled. Rage seethed in Fierce Grey's mute throat.

The wolves were making their way along the slope of a ravine when a hare burst out from under their feet. It darted and bounded just ahead of the wolves' noses for no less than a mile before it was crushed. Fierce Grey and the old leader seized it simultaneously and tore it in half. The pack lagged far behind them.

Both greedily devoured their portions and threw themselves upon each other. Clumps of snow and tufts of fur flew up fanwise. The gnashing of fangs resounded in the silence.

The two mature wolves fought, standing on their hind legs, grappling with their front paws, digging up a deep hole in the snowdrift underneath them. For a second they broke apart. The old leader snarled; he was willing to end it at that. But Fierce Grey attacked and managed to seize him below the ear—the method wolfhounds are known to employ. He crushed the old wolf underneath his belly and instantly sank his teeth into the crest of his powerful neck. He tightened his

fangs, like pincers, and broke the old wolf's neck.

The old leader lay on his side in the snow, feebly baring his jaws. The rest of the pack arrived and instantly tore him apart to the bones. The wolf shows no mercy on anything lying in its path—not even its own kind.

Night and day the horse herders maintained their vigil, yet they were helpless to protect their herds. Such terror, such brigandage had never before been known in the Black Hill district. The wolves mowed down everything living right before the shepherds' eyes.

Fierce Grey led his pack from one winter shed to another from sunset to dawn. The wolves quickly put on weight and grew heavy, but their leader did not allow them to sleep for long. He would howl and bite even the females, and they in turn would drive the younger wolves. The pack would come tearing down from the lair like an avalanche.

And there was one instance when the grey band attacked a man. A solitary traveller was driving a sledge along a well-beaten track. Only rarely would a wolf venture to approach such a road and cross it, especially if people were travelling upon it. But Fierce Grey hesitated only briefly, pinned back his ears, and went galloping after the sledge.

The horse bolted. The pack overtook it, and forced it off the road into a snowdrift. The sledge got stuck, the horse sank down up to its chest, and the wolves straddled it in a grey heap.

The traveller, terror-stricken, jumped from the sledge and began scrambling through the deep snow. Fierce Grey leapt over the sledge and tore after the fleeing man with short light bounds. Two she-wolves immediately followed the leader.

Fierce Grey, as if playing and testing his powers, made a broad circle and stopped directly in the man's path. The she-wolves came to a halt behind the back of the doomed, defenseless, and yet inviolable two-legged creature, waiting. Would the grey leader touch the human? Bring him down on all fours?

The man was saved by other people. A rumble and tramping of horses' hooves echoed from the nearby hill. Two riders came racing at a full gallop into the hollow, with piercing whistles and shouting.

Fierce Grey curled his upper lip, glanced around, and then loped off with increasing speed along the untouched snow. The pack abandoned the remains of the horse and melted into the dusky, wind-churned steppe.

And still another time Fierce Grey attempted to grapple with a man—openly.

This happened during the day. The steppe was bound with a hard frost. The whitish, pale blue sky was enveloped by a scintillating haze, through which the crimson, bloody eye of the sun peered out sullenly.

The wolves had made their way right up to the aul, their frosty breath rising up like smoke. And suddenly from the farthest winter shed a two-humped camel came heading straight towards the pack. There was a person sitting between its humps, and his head was wrapped in white—this was a woman's headdress.

Fierce Grey pricked up his ears.

This was not a horse, and the rider was not a shepherd or a herdsman. The dogs barked, but did not stick their noses out of the aul. The pack froze, anticipating an easy kill. However, the camel raised its thick-lipped head and headed straight towards the pack with an even, sweeping trot. The wolves began to rush about, colliding against one another, and spurted away into the steppe.

A strange camel! Where was he running? Why wasn't he afraid? And the rider was strange too—he didn't shout, whistle, or even wave his hands.

The wolves ran without glancing back. And Fierce Grey also ran. The camel stopped, snorting loudly. The biting January wind stirred the long dingy-brown hair on its flanks. The woman sat motionless between its humps, only the scarf on her head billowed up in the wind.

The fur stood up all over Fierce Grey's body. He seemed to become rooted to the ground and sniffed the air, extending his head with its high forehead and sharp-pointed ears.

Nothing out of the ordinary... He was not afraid of two-legged creatures; rather, it was he who always frightened them, even before he was full-grown, while still living in the aul. And here in the open steppe he was the most terrifying of all.

The pack had scattered out, looming indistinctly on the distant hills in the radiant frosty haze. Fierce Grey lingered behind. And when the camel once again threw up its head and charged after him, he unhurriedly trotted towards the hills, his tail low, almost dragging

through the snow, luring the rider farther from the aul, closer to the pack.

When the camel halted, the wolf sat down immediately. When the camel took off at a trot, the wolf trotted along in front of it. The distance between them gradually decreased. Fierce Grey measured the distance patiently, coldly.

At last the aul was hidden behind a snowbound hillside, and there was the pack!

Fierce Grey straightened up and began maneuvering the way he had the day before with the solitary traveller, bounding, almost playfully, around the camel, cutting off its path to the aul. The camel shuffled around in one spot and let out a raspy bellow, and Fierce Grey saw how the emboldened pack tore down at once from the hill.

But then he failed to notice how a smooth black stick suddenly appeared between the camel's humps. It gleamed in the sun and had a round, unblinking eye at its end.

And then, from the cloudless winter sky, thunder struck. The booming echo bounced along the surrounding hills. An invisible lead wasp sank into the wolf's thigh and burned its way through. For the first time in his life Fierce Grey gave voice to his pain. Yelping frenziedly, he bit into his thigh and somersaulted over his head, also something he had never done before.

Leaping up, Fierce Grey made his way on three legs, half-crazed with pain, away from the bellowing camel. Frozen human hands were not able to reload the weapon in time, and the wolf disappeared in a hollow.

A long thread of bright red droplets stretched out along his three-pawed tracks.

Somehow Fierce Grey managed to reach the big ravine by Black Hill and here he threw himself down on the snow. His shot thigh burned like a smouldering firebrand. The wolf began to lick the wound from the outside and in his groin, trembling and pricking his ears in fright.

The pack had left, and now nothing would lure them back to these parts. And it was good that they were far away and that the young wolves hadn't caught the scent of his fresh blood, hadn't seen him lying in the red-stained snow—that's when they would have gotten even with him!

There was no sound of pursuit either. The strange camel had not followed his trail, but Fierce Grey feared something else. He waited for the sound of dogs' barking and the pounding of horses' hooves.

But the people tarried. It took them some time to gather together the pack. The dogs would not leave the aul—they could sense the approach of an icy, protracted blizzard.

The frost did not let up, and the wind gained intensity. The steppe moaned. And the entire vast expanse was a solid curtain of snow, extending from the earth to the heavens.

Fierce Grey slowly raised himself up. Looking around, he trotted on three paws, from time to time convulsively shaking the fourth, to the rush thickets on the salt lakes.

For three days the steppe snowstorm howled and day was undistinguishable from night. For three days

Fierce Grey did not venture out of the snow-blanketed rushes. He dug himself down into a snowdrift, tucked his nose into his tail, and the blood did not freeze in his veins. It kept him warmer than the hearth of the yurt.

The grey wolf grew weak and thin, but the ragged wound in his groin closed up and began to heal.

On the fourth night he dug his way out and, limping heavily, headed towards the steppe. While running his muscles loosened up and the limping became less noticeable, but the pain did not slacken.

For an entire week he went hungry. He looked for carrion, but without success. Only towards the end of the week did his luck take a turn for the better: he stumbled upon a mare and her foal who had lagged behind the herd. He killed the foal and then lay down beside it and kept eating the whole night long, without stopping. He belched and ate, belched and ate, tucking his numb wounded leg beneath his bloated belly.

Another week passed. The wolf's thigh healed up and ached less often. He began to run faster and grew bolder. He was drawn towards Black Hill again.

Towards evening he made his way to the aul in which he had been raised, and stood on the crest of the hill, his fur standing on end from ears to tail. The camel was nowhere in sight. And there was no barking—the dogs were with the herds in the steppe. Fierce Grey descended and started roaming around the familiar paths and places, his moist nose against the wind.

From far away came the faint sweet smell of the sheep. Fierce Grey curled his lip. On the horizon, in the pale yellow light of dawn, loomed the tall figure

of a rider. A small flock of sheep clustered at the horse's legs. The shepherd was leading them to the pen.

The wolf rushed to cut them off, hiding behind knolls and hillocks. He darted out, as usual, swiftly and unexpectedly, but the shepherd spied him immediately and then suddenly cried out in a thin, child's voice, desperate, but commanding.

Fierce Grey stopped sharply, ploughing up the snow with his legs. On the horse sat a young boy, an adolescent, with a long, unwieldy shepherd's cudgel.

A boy! .. The wolf had no fear of him.

Gnashing his teeth maliciously, Fierce Grey rushed to the side in order to bypass the little shepherd, and made his way towards the piteously bleating huddle of sheep. This bleating excited the wolf. Before him was an easy, fat kill, tender bones, an abundance of blood. But the boy dug his heels into the horse's flanks with all his might, raised the heavy, disobedient cudgel above his head, and fearlessly galloped straight towards the wolf.

Fierce Grey once again involuntarily turned away from the huddled flock. The boy shouted relentlessly. And something incomprehensible in the young boy's shouting tormented and frightened the wolf. The wolf ran, and the boy chased after it, not allowing it near the sheep. Raising himself up on the stirrups, brandishing the cudgel, he cried out at the top of his lungs:

"...ok...erek! ...ok...erek! "

The wolf gnashed its fangs and quickened its pace.

The boy was an agile rider and relentlessly goaded on the obedient horse, beating it with the cudgel, but he knew that the horse was lagging behind. Fierce Grey

swept off and the boy swung the cudgel and flung it at him as if it were a spear.

It struck the wolf's bad leg with its rounded end and rolled along the icy ground, clattering and bouncing. Fierce Grey seized it furiously in his fangs and broke it instantly in two. Then he turned and, pinning back his ears, curling his lip as if smiling a ferocious wolf's smile, rushed silently at the boy. He leapt up and jerked at the hem of his sheepskin coat. The horse shied back with a terrified neigh, and the boy flew out of the saddle striking the back of his head against the icebound ground. His hat went flying from his head and rolling along the white slope.

The last thing the boy saw was the familiar wolf's ear, torn in a fight with dogs in those days when Fierce Grey still lived in the aul.

The boy was already dead when the wolf slashed his cheek with a curved fang.

During the night they picked up the boy's body and carried it to the aul where they laid it down by the hearth in the yurt.

Old Grandmother sat down at his feet.

"My poor lamb," Grandmother said over and over, "my poor lamb..."

And her wizened, weak-sighted eyes were unable to shed a single, relieving tear.

Then came the turn of the hunter Khasen, renowned in those parts, and his red and white borzoi.

Khasen had traded a horse for the hound in Semipalatinsk. On the hound's forehead was a small white

patch with four proportionate rays, for which reason his master had named him White Star—Akkaska.

There was much talk about Akkaska, everyone knew of him, and there were some who thought he was descended from the legendary dog of the folk hero Bogambai from the clan of Kanzha-gala.

The borzoi was a thoroughbred, proud and hot-tempered. At feeding time he growled as he took his meat. At halting places Khasen would chain him up, as the hound would allow only his master to come near him. The aul mongrels kept out of his way and only barked at him from a distance. Akkaska paid them no attention, yawning lazily, and would lie for hours spread out motionless, his long muzzle resting on his paws. Only during a hunt did he come to life, easily outdistancing any horse, and his bark was resonant and terrifying. His eyes gleamed like those of a wolf, but not with a green, but a reddish fire, exactly like burning coals.

Khasen spent several days with the horse herders, studying the habits of Fierce Grey, asking questions about him. And all night long there were heated arguments by the campfires about the solitary wolf which had killed Kurmash. But Khasen heard nothing that was new or surprising in their words.

Some said that the wolf was crazed. Some said that it wasn't a wolf at all, but a hyena. That was why it was so inconceivably voracious. Khasen did not believe the fables.

"It's a wolf," he said. "And you don't feed a wolf on hay! "

The horse herders swore and threatened:

"If only we could get our hands on him! "

Khasen chuckled:

"What will you do? Skin him alive?"

And only the bitter words of Kurmash's father stung Khasen to the quick. At his son's grave he had said to the hunter:

"You're an experienced fellow ... brave, stubborn... I know it's no easy thing to overpower a werewolf. But if you don't put an end to him, know this—you're no kin of mine and no *djigit*, no one will have any use for you, and your dog won't be worth a single kopeck. Don't show yourself around here again."

Khasen decided to get the herders together for a round-up, that was the only way they would be able to flush out the wolf. They needed no persuasion...

At dawn, before the hunt, Khasen did not give his hound any meat; he placed a bowl with a gruel of finely crumbled dry sheep's cheese in front of him. Akkaska ate quickly and kept his eyes fixed on his master. The intelligent animal understood: there would be a big, important hunt, a dangerous chase.

"Well, Akkaska," Khasen said, rumpling the hound's ear, "it's either you or him, there's no other way. The dead Kurmash will join us as the third..."

Akkaska looked attentively into his master's eyes, wagging his reddish tail impatiently.

They left for the steppe, and Khasen let the hound off the leash so that he could stretch his legs and get the blood flowing in his veins. With enormous bounds Akkaska raced across the snow tinged blue in the pale morning light.

Khasen separated the men into several groups and

sent them in different directions. He himself took Akkaska and ascended to the rocky summit of a solitary hill exposed to the four winds. The hunters divided up the aul dogs and galloped off. Khasen spread out a large piece of felt between the sharp rocks, told Akkaska to lie down on it and himself lay down beside him in the snow, holding the hound by the collar.

Akkaska lay calmly beneath his master's hand, only his ears, like weather vanes, continually turned from side to side. From all directions came the muffled sounds of clamorous voices, the disorderly barking of the dogs, tossed about by the wind.

All of a sudden Akkaska raised himself up on his forelegs, no longer submitting to Khasen's hand, pricking his ears and peering in the direction of a quiet hollow. Now the hound resembled an eagle spying out its prey from its perch on a cliff. But for a long time yet the hollow remained deserted, while the men's shouts and dogs' barking seemed to have receded into the distance. It was unlikely that the beaters had spied the wolf—it stalked like an invisible grey phantom inside their ring of many miles. Akkaska crouched down in an unaccustomed way and lowered his head. Maybe he had been distracted by a hare? The borzoi liked to hunt hares.

No, Akkaska had not been mistaken. All of a sudden the wolf silently appeared in the spot where the hound had been watching for him—in the quiet, deserted, snow-blanketed hollow. There he was—the cunning one! Here the snowdrifts were soft and unstable. A horse following fresh tracks would flounder and get

stuck up to its chest.

The wolf loped at a rapid but unhurried trot, looking round circumspectly, and Khasen, gripped with momentary doubt, bit his lower lip and cast a sideways glance at the hound. The grey wolf was huge and powerful and from a distance resembled a roan yearling colt with a wolf's snout. Indeed—a werewolf!

The wolf was upwind and didn't scent the hunter and borzoi. But Khazen knew that the wolf would never come close enough for a well-aimed shot and so he set loose his hound, saying: "Get time, boy! " while he himself ran for his horse which was tethered behind a cliff.

Fierce Grey sized up the build and power of the red and white borzoi at first glance. There would be no escaping it. The dog flew down the hill towards him with resonant, thundering baying; it was lean and twice as big as the skewbald hound. Behind it, between the rocks, as if between a camel's humps, he glimpsed a rider with a smooth black stick. The hunting party was all round. He must be quick!

The hound and the wolf collided on the snowy hillside, and the hound knocked the wolf off its feet and then lost its own balance and tumbled over. Both leapt up, locking their fangs, and parted with bloodied jaws, panting hoarsely. The wolf had met his match...

Several times Fierce Grey lunged at the hound and was met by heavy, well-aimed blows of its fangs. Still the wolf managed to position himself above the hound on the hillside and seized him just below the ear, as he had the pack leader early that winter. But Akkaska held his ground and tore himself free with a powerful

shake of his head, leaving a piece of his skin and reddish fur in the wolf's mouth. Fierce Grey realized that this fight would not soon be over. And the rider was already galloping down the hill, shouting fervently:

"Hold on, hold on, boy! Akkaska-a! "

Fierce Grey gave a short yelp and lunged headlong at the hound.

Once again the wolf and the hound locked their fangs so that sparks would have flown had it been dark. And here Akkaska, throwing caution aside, remembering only what his master had shouted, thrust his nose directly into the wolf's mouth and seized the beast in a death grip by the lower jaw.

Now they could not be parted: the hound gnawed at the wolf's jaw, and the wolf at the hound's, and neither could shake off the other.

Khasen galloped up. The horse danced beneath him, rearing. And Khasen's hands danced also. He tossed aside his rifle, jumped from the saddle, and also throwing caution to the wind, threw the whole weight of his body onto the stone-hard back of the wolf. He thrust a broad knife beneath his shoulder blade.

Akkaska freed his torn muzzle from the wolf's convulsively gnashing jaws and walked off. He remained standing for a brief while and then fell down. Opposite him on his side lay Fierce Grey.

The other hunters began to ride up, and one of them poked his whip-handle between the wolf's teeth, opening its bloodied black mouth, and all were astonished at how large it was.

"Devil! ..." said one, stepping back.

"Kokserek! " Khasen said, tenderly examining

Akkaska's wounds.

They carried the wolf's carcass into the aul and threw it beside Kurmash's yurt, and old Grandmother, just as Kurmash had done, recognized Fierce Grey by his tattered ear.

"Kokserek! " the old Grandmother cried, wringing her hands. "Thrice accursed! .. How could you kill Kurmash, bloodsucker! "

And with her weak leg she kicked the wolf in its gaping jaw.

A Man Needs a Dog*

Of all the animals in the world the dog is the worthiest of man's undivided attention, friendship and love. One may say, the dog is part of man.

Alfred Brehm

It was Sunday morning. Through the slumbering streets of the city floated waves of pale lavender light composed of the gleam of electric bulbs, still burning, the glow of the sun just rising from behind the tall roofs, and the glitter of freshly fallen snow. Half-empty tram-cars were clanging and creaking past the market-place, suburban trains rumbled across the via-

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duct heading for the seaside, also half-empty although the day promised well. An old man was standing at the edge of the canal, and on the pavement at his feet was a basket covered with a woollen shawl under which four pups—three dogs and a bitch—lay huddled together. He had been standing like this for about half an hour, listlessly watching the passing trams and thinking that he'd come early because he could never sleep long these days though all his life he'd been starved for sleep, but now, spitefully, sleep would flee at four thirty and sometimes even as early as four, which didn't matter so much in the summer when he could pick up a rake or a spade or a watering-can and potter in the garden, but in winter all he could do was toss on his creaking bed, light a cigarette, scratch Grācija behind the ear, and dwell on memories of the past since the future held nothing for him, that much was clear; he had enough sense to see that, and was old enough to take a philosophical view on it.

These were the old man's thoughts as he stood with the puppies at his feet, while the sun slowly rose from behind the pavilion, and the trains clattered back and forth across the viaduct, and the hubbub of voices and the thumping of crates drifted towards him from the market-place. A mixture of odours was wafted through the clear winter air—the dank, fusty smell of potatoes, carrots, swedes and turnips brought straight from the vegetable cellars, the appetizing aroma of sauerkraut and pickled cucumbers, hot dogs and meat pies that tickled the old man's nostrils. He'd left in the morning without a bite to eat, so now his Adam's apple began to work convulsively. There ought to be about a ruble

and a half in his purse, he remembered, all in small change, but money was money, so he turned to face the pavilion, and as he did so the morning sun lit up his faded cap transforming it into a kind of pinkish-orange nimbus. A ripple passed over the woollen shawl covering the basket, and the old man pulled it off. Two of the puppies had woken up and were nuzzling the wicker walls of the basket and one another, groping for their mother. The old man lifted them out to forestall a general commotion in the basket. Happily, awkwardly, their tiny paws sinking into the freshly fallen snow, they toddled off along the pavement, straining away from their wicker cradle. The old man followed them, puffing and panting, snatching at them with stiff frozen fingers from which the sleek little bodies kept sliding like slippery black pebbles.

"Little devils," he muttered. "Little black devils! " But there was no anger in his voice, and he pursued his purpose with the single-mindedness of which only the very young and the very old are capable. Presently the puppies wearied and began to whimper, the snow was freezing their paws, and besides they were hungry, like the old man himself.

He caught the fugitives and replaced them in the basket, hitched it onto his arm, and headed for the smell of hot dogs. But he didn't go straight to the eating place, he had to think of his basketful of warm life. So he made a detour, passing sacks of potatoes, barrels of sauerkraut, counters laden with fruit, and all the while his eyes were scanning the faces looking for somebody he knew and could entrust with his pups for a while.

The vendors stood mostly idle, the townsfolk were still sleeping their Sunday sleep. The old man with the basket over the edge of which four puppies were looking out drew every one's notice, people laughed and called to him—"Are you selling them?" but he plodded on unperturbed, his faded eyes brushing them indifferently. Clearly, all they wanted was a bit of fun, they'd never buy. Though he couldn't have explained it, the old man could always tell a prospective buyer from those who just stopped to fondle his little creatures for the pleasure of it. To the former belonged lonely elderly women who were easily moved because they had a surplus of love stored away, and also children who would crowd about him, spellbound, and tug at their mother's skirts, and beg and plead until they had their way. Occasionally there were other kinds of buyers too, the pups were cheap enough, after all, but they were a lot of trouble, nobody knew it better than he did, though he would deny it staunchly, he'd even swear the reverse, which was the only lie he permitted himself in his commercial transactions—if it could be called a lie. Such were the old man's thoughts as he walked past and between the counters that were piled with shiny red apples, like piles of hidden life, oversize spawn about to engender enormous fantastic fishes; where cabbages and pumpkins raised their stupid bald heads that were like pale moons, and bunches of herbs exuded a variety of smells—bitter, astringent, salty, honeyed, evoking memories of aches, and sleeplessness, and distant summers, and sweet sins. The rays of the rising sun turned the breath into plumes of pinkish steam, people were steaming little ovens framing the

aisles of the market through which the old man was walking, a little cloud of steam hovering on his own lips, swinging his wicker basket from which the four little puppies peered out at the world.

After a while he found what he wanted. A familiar face was looking at him from behind a cranberry stand, only he couldn't recollect where and how he had met her. He racked his memory, and the effort was crowned with the pleasant realization that the woman was not just an acquaintance but a relative of sorts, on his late wife's side—a cousin once removed or something. True, they hadn't met more than a couple of times, and only on very special occasions, but it was good enough for his present purpose. The woman was looking at the pups, taking no notice of the old man, her plump cheeks glistened in the frost like winter apples. The women around her, all selling cranberries, were also looking at the pups, and their cheeks were also a glossy red. They were none of them young, but wholesome of complexion and firm of flesh, and swathed in seven or eight layers of clothing against the morning frost they resembled stocky, short-stalked mushrooms. The old man took them all in and fastened his eyes on his relative. He was now impelled by a single sensation—that of unendurable hunger, because the cranberry stand was right opposite the eating place whose door kept opening and closing filling the air with the aroma of hot food. Neither the buxom women, nor anything else was of any consequence. And since his relative never took her eyes off the puppies he simply addressed her. Even then she didn't raise her eyes to him, but murmured "What a pretty little thing! "—which could

hardly refer to the old man, especially as she reached across the counter with its cranberries and tin measuring mugs, and with a blunt forefinger tickled the throat of the nearest pup.

"Why not buy it?" said the old man in a hoarse voice--his throat felt parched with the desire for something hot to eat.

At this she finally looked at him. It was clear from the expression of her face that she was in the same position in which the old man had found himself a little while ago—his face was familiar to her, but she couldn't find the connection. He was about to remind her when she addressed him by his name, so she'd remembered. They talked a little—not much, of course, what was there to talk about for two people who were almost strangers? They talked weather, market prices, the old man's wife who'd died. The old man was not in a mood for talk, he hadn't been looking for someone just to gossip with, so he came straight to the point. The women were responsive. Keep an eye on the pups? Why not? Here, put them down. Buy them? Ah well, they all had dogs of their own, two even, and his relative, it turned out, had three. Maybe she did, maybe she didn't, how was he to tell, but if they weren't going to buy there was nothing for it.

He set down the basket and walked unhurriedly to the eating place through whose door clouds of fragrant vapour hit his nostrils. His frozen fingers fumbled for the coins that were as cold as icicles though they'd been inside his purse. One portion ... no, better two, he'd have to take something to the pups. Yes, two portions, and a glass of coffee. The sausages were

scorchingly hot, the milky coffee lukewarm but strong and almost sickeningly sweet. What a man really wanted on a winter day like this was a little snifter, and then it wouldn't matter if he'd have to stand out-of-doors till doomsday. He was always chilly these days, he never felt really warm, perhaps because he'd spent his life in sweltering heat, stoking the ovens, and was accustomed to heat. Perhaps, but perhaps it was because the old frame no longer held the warmth, like an old oven too long in use. These were the old man's thoughts while his large teeth, yellow like a horse's, bit into a hot sausage, and he washed down each bite with a sip of lukewarm coffee. He also thought, as he broke bits from the slice of greyish-brown bread, that there wasn't a place in the world where ryebread tasted as good as it did in his native village, even Riga bread couldn't come anywhere near it, and if there was anyone who knew about bread it was he. Twenty years of work in a bakery wasn't to be sneezed at. True, he'd neither mixed the dough nor kneaded it, but the right kind of fire was the crux of the whole thing, so the man in charge of it was the second man after the baker—only then came the manager and all the rest of them.

The warm food slowly spread through the old man's veins like hot syrup. It made him a little giddy, he broke into a sweat, and then he felt very sprightly, as though he'd had a glass of brandy and not just coffee. When he stepped into the street it was like coming out of a bath-house, he felt steaming hot, and the air seemed no longer as nippy as it had been before, he was wide awake, and his mind was full of pleasant

thoughts. In his pocket he carried a sausage for the pups, wrapped in a paper napkin, with a handkerchief tied around it to keep it warm.

But the cranberry women had fed the creatures, he could see it at a distance, they'd lifted them out of the basket and fed them. The counter looked like a table after a meal, it was littered with paper bags and greasy wrappings and scattered with bits of cheese, slices of bread, scraps of smoked fish, and chunks of sausage. Enough to feed at least ten more puppies in addition to the four that were now frisking about under the counter practically among the passing feet. People stopped, looked down and smiled, ignoring the cranberries and saleswomen, who didn't seem to mind a bit and also smiled. And although the old man knew that such a hullabaloo might end badly, that he could be driven out with his pups to the dog market which was chock-full of purebreds and mongrels of every shade and hue, yet the spectacle made him feel warm all over, not only because now he was warm and replete inside, but mainly because his pups were eliciting all these smiles and all this admiration. So when his relative now beckoned to him and said to somebody: "Here, you can talk to the owner himself! "—he blew out his chest with pride and drawled: "Anything wrong?"—just as if he'd only come up to put an end to the excitement and noise and not to sell these priceless little creatures that were worth more than all the money in the world could pay.

"What's the damage, dad?" The question came from a young man of undefinable age, dressed so lightly for a winter morning that it made you shiver just to look

at him—neither hat nor gloves, and carrying a guitar that he was strumming all the time as though playing an accompaniment to his own words, and the women's smiles, and the clumsy capers of the puppies. From behind he could be taken for an adolescent, small, narrow in the shoulders, but his face, greyish-green with cold, flaunted toothbrush moustache and black sideburns to match. The eyes looked enormous and almost round like Victoria plums, and they were as bright as the headlights of a car, and fixed upon the pups. He looked a dog-lover all right, but he also looked the kind of person who could never keep money in his purse, so the old man asked cautiously:

"Why should you want a dog?"

"What d'you mean why? I need somebody to stick to me, who'll go where I go." And he flashed a radiant smile at the old man.

"Why don't you take a wife?" one of the women interposed while the lad continued strumming his guitar drawing from it sounds you could hardly call music.

"Too costly," he replied and burst into laughter, into which everybody joined except for the old man who held the view that business was a serious matter.

"So is a dog," he murmured.

"Is it now? How much? One ruble? Two?" asked the lad impatiently, and gathering up in his hand the outside cloth of his coat-pocket he shook it, jingling the money inside.

The tinkle of coins seemed even more distasteful to the old man, and although he had intended to charge three rubles for a pup he suddenly pronounced:

"Five. Five rubles each."

The lad's round eyes went positively circular.

"Bah! Five rubles for a rat like this?"

A rat, he'd said! A rat! But the hazel irises that floated in the whites of his eyes like footballs were starry with fun.

The old man measured the slight form of the guitar player with infinite contempt and said:

"You'd better learn to tell quality, son," adding that his pups were dachshunds, almost purebred, excellent hunting dogs, and selling them at five rubles was actually selling them for a song, his usual price was eight. This was what the old man said, though he'd got eight only once in his life, and that was when the customer had mistaken a five-ruble note for a three-ruble note, and there had been an occasion when he'd bartered a pup for four packages of Prima cigarettes—the cheapest of the cheap, but a body had to earn its keep, which applied to pups and men alike, and things and creatures bought cheaply were never valued by man, as if price could indicate value. Now the old man held forth on the beauty of Grācija, the mother-bitch, whose hair was like shiny silk, and whose legs were divinely curved, and even as he uttered her name "Grācija" it sounded like a tender caress, as if he were reminiscing on his first love—and carried away by his own words, he swept the young man away with him, for the lad wasn't made of stone, and the frozen fingers that had been vaguely producing incoherent sounds began to play some southern and very temperamental tune, a rumba or a samba perhaps, while the cranberry women's frozen feet were stiffly stamping time, heed-

less of the fact that what with the puppies and the guitar-player they hadn't done much business that morning, but they didn't mind because they all felt exhilarated by the old man's eloquence, and Grācija's silky fur and exquisite bow legs that were more beautiful than anything they could imagine, and by the fiery samba rhythms that pierced the seven or eight layers of clothing and flowed through their bodies and into every joint like hot rum.

"Come on! Buy him! " they urged. "Buy him! You won't find a better dog." He broke off his samba on a shrill chord, propped the guitar against the counter on which stood half-litre measuring mugs filled with scarlet cranberries as shiny as if they were varnished, surrounded by piles of berries, and he pulled out of his breast-pocket a five-ruble note that was as crisp and new as if it had been specially saved up for the occasion, and without any bargaining whatever, without even stopping to choose, he picked up the puppy closest at hand and murmured laughingly, the way one talks to a child:

"Want to come with Gusts, pet?"

Then, pushing his acquisition under his coat he took his guitar and walked off out of sight with a swinging gait. The old man heaved a sigh of relief: one worry less. Inspired by his success he cried out jauntily:

"Hurry up! Final bid! "

But the people had had their fun, and they began to disperse and go about their own business. The old man hitched the basket with the remaining puppies on his arm and also got moving. Again he passed sacks and barrels and counters, and about him rose and fell a

hubbub of voices and a swirl of colours and faces, and towards him flowed a motley stream of warm humanity, steaming in the cold winter air. It was light, the sun had risen above the roofs and was beating down upon the glass panes of the pavilions transforming them into sheets of blazing copper.

The old man had almost reached the canal when a girl ran full tilt into him, one of a trio of girls in trousers who were walking towards him giggling and chattering, gazing everywhere except where they were going. It may have been pure chance, but it may have been God's finger, anyway, the old man with his basket seemed just what they'd been yearning to meet. They crowded around it, greedy, impatient hands reaching for the puppies, while rosy lips curled in flashing smiles emitting steaming tender whispers of endearment as if addressing human babies. Flushed with the frost, lithe and young, dressed in similar trousers, the three seemed as identical to the old man as his three puppies whom the girls were holding in their hands and fondling. Then one of them uttered breathlessly the very words the old man was thinking:

"It's fate, girls, it can't be chance! Let's buy a puppy for Alec instead of flowers! He adores dogs, doesn't he?"

There was loud approval. One single rose cost three rubles, and a calla lily was no good, except for funerals, and if they bought cyclamen they'd have to add a cake and a bottle of wine which would be an awful lot of money, and besides it would be so bourgeois, but a dog—now wasn't that a real present, Alec would be knocked over. They chirped and twittered, forget-

ting to ask, in their excitement, whether the puppies were for sale and how much they cost. The old man didn't interrupt or hurry them, allowing their fervour to kindle, and knowing from experience what buyers were like—you had to know the exact time, the precise moment when they were ripe. When the moment came he cleared his throat about to reiterate all he had been saying over and over again that morning—that the puppies were as good as purebred, and enormously valuable, and how it pained him to part with these lovely little creatures, and it was a real privilege to become the rightful owner of an animal that was so boundlessly devoted to man. But one look at the girls was enough for him to realize the futility of words: one of them had already pulled out an orange suede purse, so all he said was:

"Well, take your choice! See which one you like best."

But even this was too much for them, the puppies were alike—ah, but one had a teeny-weeny white star on its chest.

"Let's have this one, with the star! " said the girl with the purse. "How much?"

"This one? Four."

"And that?"

"Five."

"Funny. Why should the prettier one be cheaper?"

"The one with the star is a bitch," said the old man, because the girls were so young, so delightfully young and pure and artless in their enthusiasm, so full of selfless joy at the prospect of buying a present that he couldn't bring himself to cheat them.

The three exchanged a glance.

"Well, girls, what do we decide?"

"I don't see why a bitch should be worse than a dog?"

"O come on, Alda, don't be so naive! "

"All right, let's take the expensive one! " The girl in charge of the money heaved a sigh and jingled the purse. "Aid to starving students! "

"Haven't we collected enough?"

"Don't be mean! It's only two days till we get our grant."

The old man was actually prepared to knock off a ruble or so, but these young innocents had not the faintest notion of the excitement of commercial transactions; a bit of bargaining and haggling could have enabled him to reduce the price without losing face, while they simply scraped together the full sum to a kopeck and pressed five rubles into his calloused palm. The one with the purse said laughingly, "Check the money before leaving the counter! "—which the old man did not do, of course. He very much wanted to ask what the young ladies were studying, but he saw that he himself was of no consequence at all to the girls who were deeply engrossed in the important process of cradling their puppy in a bright blue artificial leather bag. They had their own concerns and he had his, so without waiting for them he walked away and was soon back where he had started from, at the canal.

A wind had struck up, and it was chiller here than among the pavilions, but it was a tram-stop where many people got off for the market and he was more likely to get rid of his dogs. The wind swished along

the canal whirling and eddying the snow that had fallen overnight, here and there baring a smooth gray surface of ice, and it had swept the sky very clean as well. Swirls and wisps of snow rolled and glided across the pavement leaving powdery traces in the crinkles of the old man's trousers and in the dull dark fur of the pups. The pups were scraping the wicker walls of their basket with their little claws, trembling and whimpering faintly and blinking towards their unknown dogs' future with weak pale baby eyes, but it was not fear that made them whimper and shiver, but cold.

They had been there for quite a while, and it was very cold, and no one cared to buy a dog. People would stop occasionally to fondle a pup, moved by a sudden impulse to buy a live warm being to compensate for the stone walls of the city, but when it came to the point they would merely shrug to express regret, and pass on. It was either a matter of sharing a flat with other families, or of a mother-in-law, or a top floor. Maybe they were telling the truth, and maybe they weren't, how was he to tell, but his heart was growing heavy, and as to charging five rubles a pup—he'd be glad now to get three, and there came a moment when he'd have accepted two.

At this very point a man stopped in front of him, middle-aged, tall, rather impressive, but somehow creased and crumpled, as if he'd slept all night with his clothes on. He stopped and looked down at the puppies in their basket with curiosity, or perhaps with contempt, at any rate the old man didn't like him. He couldn't have explained it—perhaps it was the man's unkempt appearance that displeased him, perhaps the

realization that he was tipsy so early in the morning, which was something he simply couldn't stand, or perhaps because he was standing there, hands thrust into his trouser-pockets, peering at the puppies like a rooster at two grains in a dungheap, and this made the old man's blood boil, for he held that life was a sacred thing.

"Anything you want?" he growled when the stranger didn't budge and continued blinking and staring as though out to pick a quarrel. "Never seen a dog in your life? Get along with you, quick."

He knew full well that he had no business to tell a person where to look or where to stand, but trade was slack, he was getting damnably cold, and he was sick to death of all the empty talk he'd been doing, and if you are in this state of mind you don't need much to blow up, and besides this crumpled individual didn't look as if he cared for dogs, especially if it involved spending money.

Far from moving away the man gave a hard little laugh that made the old man wrinkle his nose—the fellow reeked of drink, or perhaps it was a hangover from the night before.

"You're a touchy old blighter," he said with a hint of threat behind a drunkard's bravado. "But I don't mind your sort."

"All right, push along then and don't pick on me! " the old man growled again, unwilling to enter an argument.

"You're a funny old bird! " Now the fellow seemed genuinely surprised. "You want to sell, and you won't let me look! Who do you think is going to buy your

pigs in a poke?"

"In à poke or out of a poke, you won't buy them anyway."

"What makes you think so?" the man said cockily.

"Because it's not for lice I sell them, but for money," and the old man spat on the ground.

"Why, listen to that! " The man was obviously deeply hurt. "I've got more dough than you have, I'm sure. Just wait! " He thrust a hand into his breast-pocket. "How much do you want?"

And then something totally unpredictable happened. The old man suddenly knew that he did not want to sell his puppy to this man, that he'd regret it if he did, and would suffer pangs of conscience if he let that lanky good-for-nothing have it, with his insolent eyes and contemptuous mouth that spat out words like empty nutshells. To his own surprise, although he'd been prepared to let a dog go for two rubles, he found himself saying with cool arrogance:

"Ten rubles! And no bargaining."

"Did I hear you say something, or did I imagine it?" The hand shot out of the breast-pocket.

"You heard me," the old man said, feeling suddenly very pleased with himself, and very calm and serene.

Not so the other one—a flush of excitement covered his face, his eyes glittered, and like a card-player producing his fatal trump he exclaimed:

"Three! Three is my price, and not a kopeck more, and it's more than fair."

"I'm sick of you! " the old man growled and heaved a sigh, for he was sorry for the puppy, but he was also sorry to lose three rubles. "Why don't you just go

your way. I wouldn't trust you with a dog of mine if you paid me twenty-five."

"Why? What's wrong with me? My hair style? My figure? Or my background perhaps?"

"A dog needs a proper master, and not a macaroni chewed at both ends."

"Why, listen to that! " Again he seemed hurt to the quick. "It's your luck that you're such an old wreck of a creature, or I'd let you have a swipe."

"O my God," said the old man. "Can't you leave me alone? You don't need a dog, and I don't need your money, so we're quits."

"You've got to sell me your dog! " the fellow persisted, and the old man thought that he'd experienced all sorts of things in the course of his long life, but this was the strangest thing of all, he'd always had to persuade his buyers and coax them, and rouse their pity and sympathy, but this one—why, the fellow clung to him like a leech. Truth to tell, he'd be happy to be rid of one more puppy if only the chap hadn't looked so tough and mean, so utterly unfit for the lofty task of being the owner and friend of a dog, and a puppy was like a human child, it needed a firm, calm hand, and understanding, and affection. These were the old man's thoughts as he was trying to keep his eyes averted from the purse the other had produced and in which he was fumbling with long stiff fingers whipping up his own desire for the dog, wanting the puppy more every minute, though at first he had stopped to look at it out of boredom, indifferently, even contemptuously, one might say—it was resistance that had stimulated his desire, he had the disposition

of a woman hunter, a heartbreaker. As if to prove the perversity of the world, he seized the old man by the coat-button and, breathing alcohol right into his face and forgetting his recent anger, started assuring him at great length that the pup would have a wonderful life, he'd live on frankfurters and meat pies, because Irma worked in a café—the Sandra, he ought to know it, best coffee in Riga, and the freshest pastries, and then followed such a vivid picture of fresh buns and crusty pies that the old man's mouth began to water, and his heart melted with a taste of approaching surrender. Everything happened as if in a dream. Without meaning to sell, the old man reached out for the green note not of his own accord but impelled by a mysterious force that pulled at his hand. When finally he found himself watching the receding figure of the tall good-for-nothing who had tucked the puppy into his coat, he couldn't believe it had happened with his conscious participation and not by a sleight of hand, or some witchcraft that was still holding him enthralled. However, there was the money in his hand, so he had to reconcile himself with reality, and folding up the three-ruble note he shoved it into his pocket.

The wind had grown icy, or so it seemed to the old man, it hit him cuttingly behind the ears and froze the remaining puppy's soft little body. Seeing it shiver all over—no more brothers to snuggle up to—the old man said: "You poor little shrimp! " And he unbuttoned his coat and pushed the dog inside it feeling through his sweater the touch of the blunt claws and the light, quick beat of the tiny heart. The puppy continued to shiver and turned and twisted on the old man's chest.

He sighed, but said nothing, for they both suffered and neither was to blame.

Eddies of powdery snow rolled over the frozen ground, trams screeched as they swerved round the bend of the rails, people hurried past, their footfalls crunching in the snow. The old man had thrust his right hand into his coat-pocket, while the left was supporting the pup that had at last stopped shivering and slept inside his coat. The frost cut through the mitten, but the old man didn't dare move his stiffened fingers lest he wake the puppy—it needed a bit of sleep. The wind whirled the fine snow about the old man's legs powdering his large black laced boots. The pup's unruffled sleep made him yearn for warmth, all his thoughts were suddenly centred on his stove, a shelf in a bath-house, a cup of hot tea, vodka in a dewy glass, and he thought—as soon as he sold the pup he'd hurry to the store and buy himself a small bottle, and then he'd go straight home and fix himself a proper grog, to make up for the long cold morning. He'd get the stove as hot as a flat-iron, and then he'd drink a glass of grog—better two, it wouldn't do to get sick. Aye, that's what he'd do the moment he was rid of the pup. Such were the old man's thoughts while the wind whirled the powdery snow about his boots and swished round his ears, and the pup, snug against his chest, the tip of its black bewhiskered little muzzle peeping out from under the coat, slept its trustful sleep, blissfully unaware of the man's beautiful plans which could be wrecked by the very fact of its unruffled sleep. Once set in motion, the man's thoughts continued to spin on and on of their own accord. Now he was thinking that

the two of them, he and Grācija, were growing older and the pups were getting fewer and not so beautiful, and he wasn't at all what he used to be and had better take a philosophical view of it for he'd had a wife, and he still had his sons, and the sons had outgrown him as their sons would outgrow them in due course; that he could live with his children but didn't want to be a burden on anyone so he kept to his own flat, and he had his own pension and his garden and his Grācija and he was both master and servant, and though at this moment he was frozen stiff and trembling like a chicken in the rain, yet he could, if he chose, go home straightway, pick up his basket and go, and this was his great freedom—he could go or stay, as he pleased—it was the freedom that age had given him to make up for what it had taken away from him in the course of years—for only the young and the green saw age as the end of all.

Thinking these thoughts, the old man didn't notice the boy of seven or eight, who had been watching him for some time now from under a grey rabbit-skin hat that half-covered an upwards-tilted face, round and rosy like a bun fresh from the oven, with two currants for eyes. Presently the boy spoke to him:

"Grandad... I say, grandad! Where did you get that lovely dog?"

The old man looked down and said he was selling it.

"You are?! " The boy raised a red-and-white mitten and touched the little black muzzle. "He's asleep! "

The old man lifted the pup out of the dark of his bosom into broad daylight. The pup opened its eyes and gave a wide yawn. The boy broke into laughter, his

brown eyes dancing.

"Look! Look! He's got teeth! And a little tongue! "

"Of course he has! " said the old man, and added: "Why not buy it? You'll have a friend. A man needs a dog."

"Does he? Does it... Does it cost a lot of money?"

"Well—I'll let you have it for a ruble and a half," said the old man after a moment's hesitation, but the boy's unblinking eyes remained fixed on him, and he didn't utter a sound.

"Come on, make up your mind! " said the old man and he told the boy that he'd sold two pups at five rubles each this very morning, and he'd once had occasion to charge as much as eight, and a ruble and a half was no money at all, like selling it for a song.

"I haven't got such a lot of money," the boy said wistfully and heaved a sigh.

The old man remembered the sausage in his coat-pocket, broke off a little piece and fed it to the dog.

"Grandad! "

"What is it?"

"May I look at him, just like that?.."

"What do you mean—just like that?"

"I mean, if I can't pay..."

Now it was the old man's turn to heave a sigh. The pup was munching its sausage, pleased with its dog's life, and the two humans stood watching in silence.

"Grandad! "

"What is it?"

"Let me hold it, just for a little! "

The boy set down his string-bag that contained an empty glass jar covered with a plastic lid, reached out

for the pup and clutched it awkwardly, laughing out loud, but the pup was uncomfortable and waggled its legs trying to reach the ground.

"How he kicks! " the boy exclaimed, clutching the pup for all he was worth, while the animal wriggled desperately to escape his grip. "He's so tiny, but look how strong he is! I can't hold him! What's his name?"

The pup had no name. So the boy tried out every dog-name he knew—Dingo, and Caro, and Mars, and Jack, and when the pup failed to respond to any of them he passed over to names no dog in the world has ever been called yet—human names, and bird names, and then he invented names as long as a railway train, and others as tender as the rustle of leaves, but the pup wouldn't listen and just went on wriggling and writhing and whining.

"Don't squeeze it so hard! Hold it properly, don't squeeze! "

The old man helped the boy to slip the pup inside his coat. At once it quietened down and lay still, gazing into the wide world from behind the boy's coat-sleeve, and only the little heart went on beating very rapidly. The boy could feel it through his red-and-white mitten, and his eyes brimmed with tenderness.

"Grandad..."

"Yes, what is it?"

"If I give you all the money I have?.."

The old man was silent.

"And the jar, too. Please, Grandad! "

"How much d'you have?" the old man growled.

The boy set down the pup, pulled off his mitten and began to count. Seventy kopecks in the purse, eleven

in the pocket,—oh! And the glass jar, that was another ten. Ninety one kopecks all in all.

Again the old man heaved a sigh.

"Oh all right! Take it."

The boy poured the coins into the old man's palm and pushed the dog into his string-bag from which he had removed the jar.

"He won't escape like this! " His eyes, radiant with happiness, were glued to the pup.

"Do you have far to go?"

"Where? Home, you mean? No ... not really... Through the viaduct and then a little way up. Meistaru Street. D'you know it?"

The old man didn't.

When the boy lifted the string-bag the pup's little paws stuck out through the loops. The old man was about to say something but decided it wasn't worth it if the boy didn't have far to go.

"Bye-bye! " the boy said without looking up at the old man.

The old man carefully folded up the woollen shawl and put it in the empty basket. Then he added the jar. It had a green plastic lid. The memory of the boy rankled in his mind. What the hell did he want with the jar? However... He put it in the basket. His bones felt rusty with all the standing about, and his joints creaked when he got moving. The black-laced boots skidded on the trodden snow, they'd recently been thickly soled. At first his legs seemed stiff as pokers, but they loosened up by and by, the toes tingled as they came to life, and before long his whole body warmed and his thoughts grew happier and lighter. The

recent experience no longer darkened his mood. He'd made thirteen rubles and ninety-one kopecks, he calculated, barring the fare it still amounted to more than twelve rubles clear profit. Not very much, but enough to gratify some very simple human needs. A lot of things in this world acquired a different value if you looked at them a little more philosophically...

By the time the old man reached his stop it was afternoon. The pups in the basket were superseded by a sausage and a loaf of crusty new bread that lay side by side in friendly unison. A shiny metal bottle-top peeped from his coat-pocket. The winter sun was slanting coldly between the trees. The wind came sweeping down the white expanse of the Daugava, whipping the snow from the branches of trees. After the Riga streets that traffic and pedestrians had turned a dirty grey, everything here looked sparkling white. Carefully stepping into footprints previously sunk into the snow, the old man passed the bakery where he used to work. The gate was locked, the chimney cold, there was no smoke streaming in the wind, the two-storeyed brick building did not emit the usual fragrance of newly-baked bread, everything smelt of cool wet snow—for it was Sunday. Sparrows filled the air with their chirping and twittering.

The old man lived on the bank of the Daugava. In summer, especially in the hot season, the place was alive with a hubbub of sounds—the roar of motor-boats, the shrieks and squeals of bathers—but in winter it was as though a lid of ice had been lowered upon the place, from which issued now and again a sound like glass cracking. As soon as the river came into view the old

man sensed the proximity of home even before he could see it, and when it finally materialized before his eyes, small and dark against the sparkling snow, with two entrances—one for his neighbours and one for himself—and two chimneys, with starling-houses and snow-clad flowerbeds, he quickened his pace, because Grācija had been languishing indoors all this time. As he unlocked the door he could hear her shuffling about, breathing wheezily. He called to her, and her breath came quicker and louder, he could feel her impatient expectancy.

Grācija flew towards him but came to a sudden halt before the basket and sniffed at it, pushing her black muzzle against the wickerwork.

"Come along, now! " said the old man unpacking his purchases and pushing the basket under the steps.

Grācija trotted off to the door, impatiently begging to be let out. She was an old bitch, very grey, her belly sagging, for time had not spared her any more than it spares anybody or anything. The old man opened the door for her, then got busy with the stove. The wind had drawn all the warmth from the house, but by the time the kettle was boiling, it felt quite comfortable. He put the frying-pan on the range and fried up a few slices of sausage and some potatoes left over from the previous night. When everything was ready he remembered Grācija and called her from the door. She didn't appear. He stepped outside, walked round the house, and saw her. She was crouching in the snow, gazing into the white distance beyond the Daugava, whimpering sadly and silently as though reliving some secret memories from her dog's life. He

called to her. She started, then rose heavily and approached him, pressed herself against his legs and looked up at him questioningly.

"It's all right, all right now," said the old man, and together they returned to the warm, fragrant, steamy kitchen.

He opened the bottle and fixed himself a grog. It went down like fire—hot and strong. Grācija lay at his feet, pressing her belly against the floor, her dark glittering eyes fastened upon his face. He put a slice of fried sausage before her, but she wouldn't touch it and just lay there cooling her painfully swollen teats against the floorboards, gazing at the old man.

He made himself a second grog.

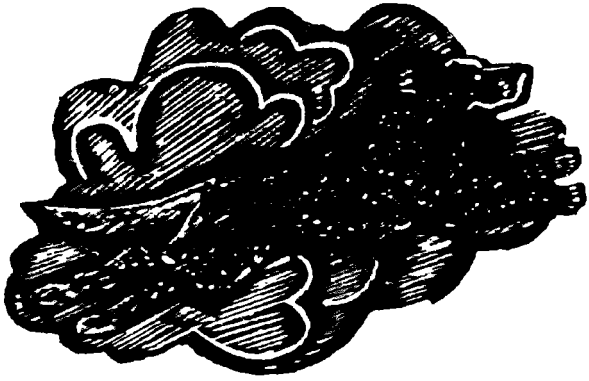
His ears were burning like fire, the wind had bitten into them good and hard. A warm, light giddiness rose to his head, all the day's events flowed through his mind, he felt a great need to talk. He could have gone out to see next-door neighbour, if his legs hadn't felt so heavy, and his head so light, besides, he grudged him the vodka he'd have to take along, and it wouldn't be nice, anyway, if he brought a half-empty bottle—especially one that the factory hadn't provided with a stopper. So when the old man had emptied the second glass he addressed himself to Grācija. He told her about the man with the guitar who had bought her first pup, and the crazy piece of music he'd played, so wild and fiery that even the cranberry women couldn't help stamping time, it was music that sent shivers down one's spine, and it was dedicated to Grācija's first pup.

Carried away by his own story, the old man soon found himself talking about the three student girls, so

young and fresh, so amazingly alike, like sisters, and how tenderly they'd placed Grācija's second pup in a bright blue bag, that sparkled like a Christmas cracker, and how they'd kept fussing over it as though it were a prince they were conveying to his royal carriage, whispering words of endearment so sweet they could melt the heart of the toughest youth, let alone that of a dog. When he recalled the third pup he saw with his mind's eye the crusty appetizing pies it would be fed on every day of its life, and as he uttered the word "pies" he could actually see them, hot and enticing, filled with the choicest meat and spices with delicious onions, gleaming in the twilight of the room like little candles, as fragrant as violets, as heady as herbs. And finally, elated by his recollections, the old man said that no one had ever offered him anything like the price he'd received that day for the fourth pup, for people always offered no more than part of what they possessed, never all of it,—but not so the boy who's bought Grācija's fourth pup—a bitch at that; he'd given him all the money he had, down to the last kopeck, and a glass jar to boot, and a man's all was a man's all, it couldn't be measured in terms of kopecks or rubles, it was the highest price in the world.

And when the old man had finished his story he saw that Grācija had picked up her slice of sausage and was munching it slowly, and, deeply moved, he said that even a dog's heart had its measure of pain, just like a man's; you could fill a glass only to the brim, for what was more would spill over. And the neighbours who heard his voice behind the wall said the old man was either drunk or crazy, he was talking to himself. Which

was not true, he was neither the one nor the other, neither crazy nor drunk, nor was it to himself he'd been talking. The truth was—he was feeling happy because he hadn't lived the day in vain, he had placed his pups into good hands and not just sold them to any passer-by, because man must be responsible for his dog, and this is a truth people ought to know.



Arcturus, the Hound

1

His appearance in the town remains a mystery. He came from somewhere in the spring, and he stayed.

Some said that passing Gypsies had abandoned him in the spring.

Strange people, Gypsies! They break camp in early spring. Some travel by train, some by boat or raft, others jog along the roads in carts, throwing resentful glances at the passing motor-cars. People with southern blood in their veins, they seek out the northernmost spots in the land. Suddenly, they pitch camp outside the town, loiter about the market-place for several days, fingering things and haggling, and go round the houses, tell fortunes, swear and laugh—swarthy, handsome people wearing earrings and colourful clothes.

And then they leave town, disappearing as suddenly as they had appeared, never to be seen there again. Others will come, but not these. The world is a big place and they do not like to revisit places where they had been before.

And so, many people were convinced that the Gypsies had abandoned him in the spring.

Others said that he had come floating down on an ice-floe during the spring freshet. He had stood amid the white-blue medley of drifting ice, a still black figure. Overhead had flown the swans with cries of "klink-klank! "

People always looked forward with a thrill to the coming of the swans. And when they come over, rising from the flood meadows at dawn with their great spring call "klink-klank", people follow them with their eyes, and the blood begins to sing in their hearts—they know, then, that spring has come.

The ice was drifting downstream with snapping, booming noises, the swans were crying, and he stood there on the icefloe, his tail between his legs, wary, uncertain, nose and ears intent on what was going on around him. When the icefloe touched the bank, he got excited, made an awkward leap, fell into the water, but scrambled ashore quickly, shook himself and hid among the log stacks.

Be that as it may, he came in the spring, when the days were filled with sunshine, with the babble of running streams and the smell of bark, and he stayed in the town.

His past can only be guessed at. He was probably born under some doorstep, on a litter of straw. His

mother, a purebred Kostroma hound with a long low body, had disappeared under the porch when her time came to perform her great act in secrecy. They had called her, but she had not responded, had not eaten anything. She was wrapped up in herself, waiting for something to happen, something that was more important than anything else in the world, more important even than the chase and men—her masters and her gods.

Like all puppies he was born blind, and was promptly licked over by his mother and laid next to her warm belly, which was still tensed with birth throes. And while he lay there, learning to breathe, he was joined by sisters and brothers. They wriggled, grunted, and tried to whimper—all dun-coloured puppies with naked bellies and short quivering tails. Presently it was all over, and each had found a teat. The only sounds were a sniffing of noses and a smacking of greedy lips, and the heavy breathing of the mother. And so their life began.

In due course all the puppies opened their eyes and were delighted to find a world so much greater than the one they had been living in. He, too, had opened his eyes, but it was not given him to see the light of day. He was blind. A thick grey film covered his eyes. He had a bitter time in store for him. Life was going to be a terrible thing, could he have but realized it. But he did not know that he was blind, he could not know it. He took life as he found it.

It so happened that he was not drowned or killed in puppyhood, which would only have been an act of mercy towards a helpless unwanted puppy. He lived to

undergo painful experiences which hardened him both in body and soul while he was still at a tender age.

He had no master to give him a roof, to feed him and take care of him as of a friend. He became a homeless dog, a vagrant—sullen, clumsy and suspicious. His mother, having reared him, quickly lost all interest in him, as she did in his brothers. He learned to howl like a wolf, with the same long-drawn dismal cry. He was dirty and often ill. He rummaged about in the rubbish heaps outside the eating-places, and together with other homeless and hungry dogs, like himself received kicks and the contents of slop pails over him.

He was not able to run fast, and his legs, his strong legs, were really of little use to him. He had a feeling all the time that he was heading for something sharp and very hard. When he fought with other dogs—and he had many a scrap in his time—he did not see his enemies. He snapped and rushed at the sound of breathing, at the growls and yelps, and often snapped at the empty air.

No one knows what name his mother had given him at birth—every mother, even a dog, always knows her children by name. To people he was nameless. Who knows whether he would have stayed in the town, or have slunk away to die in some ravine, had not human intervention changed the whole pattern of his life.

2

I was living that summer in a small northern town. It stood on the bank of a river. White steamboats, dirty-brown barges, long rafts, and broad-nosed scows

with pitch-blackened sides sailed up and down the river. The jetty smelt of bast matting, rope, damp rot and fish. Few people used the jetty except suburban farmers on market-day and official visitors to the saw-mill from the regional centre.

Dense virgin forest covered the hillsides around the town. Drift timber was felled upstream. The forest had large glades in it and secluded lakes with old pines towering along the banks. The pines murmured softly all the time. But when a cool moist wind blew from the Arctic Ocean, driving up the clouds, the pines boomed threateningly and dropped cones, which hit the ground with a thud.

I rented a room on the edge of the town, an upstairs room in an old house. My landlord, a doctor, was a silent man, who was forever busy. He had once had a large family, but his two sons were killed in the war, his wife died, and his daughter moved to Moscow. He was now living by himself, treating children. The doctor had one peculiarity—he liked to sing. He sang all kinds of arias in the thinnest of falsettos, sustaining the high notes with an air of sheer bliss. There were three rooms downstairs, but he seldom used them. He ate his meals on the verandah and slept there. The rooms were gloomy, and smelt of dust, drugs and fusty wallpaper.

The window of my room gave on to a neglected garden, overrun with currant and raspberry bushes, and with burdock and nettles growing along the fence. In the mornings the sparrows made a fuss outside the window, and blackbirds flocked together to peck the currants. The doctor did not drive them away, neither

did he collect the berries. Sometimes the neighbour's hens and cock would fly up on the fence. The cock would crow lustily, with outstretched neck and quivering tail, the while he glanced round the garden with a curious eye. Finally, he would succumb to temptation and flutter down, followed by the hens, and all of them would start rummaging around the currant bushes. Cats straggled into the garden, too. They would crouch among the burdock, ambushing the sparrows.

I had been living in the town for a fortnight, and still could not get used to the quiet streets with their board walks and the grass growing between the planks, to the creaky stairs, and the occasional hoot of a steamboat at night.

It was an odd town. The white nights lasted nearly all through the summer. A brooding peace reigned over its riverside and streets. At night the sound of footfalls could distinctly be heard outside the houses—these were workers returning from the night shift. All night long the sleeping inhabitants could hear the steps and laughter of courting couples. It seemed as if the houses had keen-eared walls and the town itself lay hushed, listening to the tread of its wakeful inhabitants.

At night our garden smelt of currants and dew, and from the verandah came the quiet snores of the doctor. On the river a steam launch sang out in a snuffling voice: "Too-too..."

One day a new tenant appeared in the house. It happened like this. On returning from duty, the doctor saw the blind dog cowering among the logs with a bit of string round his neck. The doctor had seen him

before on several occasions. This time he stopped, took careful stock of him, clicked his tongue, whistled, then took hold of the string and dragged the blind dog off to his house.

There the doctor washed him with warm water and soap and fed him. The hound quivered and shrank while he ate. He ate greedily, bolting his food and choking. His forehead and ears were covered with whitened scars.

"Run along now! " the doctor said, when the dog had eaten his fill. He tried to push him off the verandah, but the dog hung back, trembling.

"H'm..." the doctor muttered and seated himself in his rocking-chair. Evening was drawing in. The sky darkened, but still glimmered. The bigger stars lit up in it. The hunting dog lay down on the verandah and dozed. He was scraggy and raw-boned, and his ribs showed through his sides. Every once in a while he opened his dead eyes, pricked up his ears, and turned his head, sniffing. Then he laid his head on his paws again and shut his eyes.

The doctor looked at him in perplexity and fidgeted about in his chair, racking his brains what name to give him. What was he to call him? Or perhaps he had better get rid of him while it wasn't too late? What did he want a dog for! The doctor gazed at the sky. Low down over the horizon a big star twinkled with a bright blue light.

"Arcturus," the doctor muttered.

The dog's ears twitched and he opened his eyes.

"Arcturus! " the doctor repeated, his heart beating faster.

The dog raised his head and wagged an uncertain tail.

"Arcturus! Come here, Arcturus! " the doctor called in a now masterful joyous tone. The dog got up, approached the man and cautiously poked his muzzle into his knees. The doctor laughed and laid his hand on his head.

There are as many kinds of dogs as there are human characters. Some dogs are beggars and cadgers, some free dour vagabonds, others mushy barkers. There are dogs who demean themselves, who come crawling to the first person who whistles to them. There are servile grovellers, tail-waggers and cringing toadies, those who scuttle away, squealing with panic, when you hit them or even just threaten them.

I have seen devoted dogs, dogs submissive and capricious, dogs swaggerers, stoics, and lickspittles, dogs apathetic, sly and stupid. Arcturus resembled none of these. His feelings towards his master were wonderful and sublime. He loved him passionately and poetically, perhaps more than life itself. Those feelings were too sacred to be paraded.

There were moments when the master was in a bad humour, sometimes he was indifferent, often he smelt irritatingly of eau de Cologne—an odour never met with in Nature. More often than not, however, he was kind, and then Arcturus would pant with love. His coat would become fluffy and his whole body would tingle. He felt like jumping up and racing away madly with a joyous bark. But he checked himself. His ears would get floppy, his tail droop, his body grow limp, and only his heart would start hammering loud and fast.

And when his master began jostling him about, tickling him, stroking him and laughing a low chortling laugh, what rapture it was! His master's voice was then a medley of sounds, short and prolonged, gurgling and whispering, at once resembling the tinkle of flowing water and the rustle of trees. It was like no other sound. It called forth gleams of memory, faint smells of something, like a drop that raises ripples on water, and it seemed to Arcturus that all this had happened to him before, a long time ago, so long ago that he could not remember where it was and when.

3

I soon got a chance of studying Arcturus more closely, and learned many curious things.

Looking back now, I think that he was somehow aware of his inferiority. To look at he was a full-grown dog with strong legs, and black-and-tan colouring. He was powerful and husky for his age, but all his movements betrayed a strained hesitancy of manner. His muzzle and his whole body expressed a sort of abashed inquiry. He knew perfectly well that all the living creatures around him were freer and quicker than he was. They ran faster and surer, trod easily and firmly without stumbling or running into anything. Their footfalls had a different sound to his. He always moved warily and slowly in a sidling manner—there were so many obstacles in his way. On the other hand, fowls, pigeons, dogs, sparrows, cats and people and lots of other animals fearlessly ran upstairs, jumped ditches,

turned corners, flew away and disappeared in such baffling places, while his own lot was uncertainty and wariness. I never saw him walking or running freely and swiftly, except perhaps on a wide road, in a meadow, or on the verandah of our house. But while animals and humans were something he could understand and possibly identify himself with, such things as motor-cars, tractors, motorcycles and bicycles were totally incomprehensible and frightening to him. Steamboats and launches excited his curiosity tremendously at first, but realizing that he would never be able to fathom that mystery, he took no further notice of them. He showed a similar lack of interest in airplanes.

Although he could not see anything, he had a scent which no other dog could match. Little by little he came to know all the smells of the town and could find his way about with ease. He never went astray and always found his way home. Every thing had a smell of its own. There were smells galore, and all of them loudly declared themselves. Every object had its smell—some unpleasant, some neutral, some sweet. Arcturus had but to raise his head and sniff the wind to be able immediately to distinguish rubbish heaps and dustholes, houses of wood and stone, fences and sheds, people, horses and birds, as clearly as if he could see them.

Embedded in the earth behind the riverside warehouses was a large grey boulder which Arcturus was especially fond of sniffing over. The stone itself had no smell worth mentioning but its fissures and pores held the most fascinating and unexpected smells. They lingered there sometimes for weeks, and nothing but

a strong wind could blow them out. Arcturus never ran past that boulder without stopping to investigate. He spent a long time round it, snorting, sniffing at it and getting terribly excited, then running off and coming back again to nose out further details.

He also heard the faintest of sounds, which no human ear could catch. He awoke at nights, opening his eyes and pricking up his ears, listening. He heard the softest murmurs for miles around. He heard the song of a gnat and the buzz of a wasp-nest in the hay-loft. He heard the rustle of a mouse in the garden and the padded walk of a cat on the shed roof. The house to him was not a dead and silent thing as it was to us. It was alive: it creaked, and rustled, and crackled, and quivered ever so slightly from the cold. Dew dripped down the rain-spout and fell on the stone slab below, drop by drop. From below came the faint splash on the river. The heavy layer of logs stirred in the boom by the saw-mill. Rowlocks creaked softly—someone was crossing the river in a boat. And far away in the village the cocks crowed faintly in the farmyards. It was a life of which he knew and heard nothing, but which, to him, was familiar and comprehensible.

Another thing about him was that he never yelped or whimpered, seeking sympathy or pity, although life treated him harshly.

One day I was walking down a road that ran out of town. Evening was drawing in. It was warm and still with that serene peace which only a summer evening gives. Dust rose in the distance along the road, and one could hear mooing, drawn-out shouts and the crackling of whips. The cows were being driven in from the meadows.

Suddenly I saw a dog making towards the herd with a business-like air. From the peculiar, strained, hesitant way in which he ran I immediately recognized Arcturus. He had never gone out of town before. "Where is he off to?" I wondered, then suddenly I noticed signs of unusual excitement among the approaching herd.

Cows do not like dogs. They have an inborn fear and hatred of that doglike breed—wolves. Seeing a dark dog running towards them, the front rank halted. A squat-bodied dun-coloured bull with a ring in his nose pushed his way through to the front. With legs planted wide apart, and head lowered to the ground, he bellowed threateningly. His skin twitched and his bloodshot eyes rolled wildly.

"Grishka! " someone shouted from behind. "Run ahead, quick, the cows have stopped! "

Arcturus, suspecting nothing, was trotting down the road in his ungainly way, and had already approached quite close to the herd. Frightened, I called him. He stopped dead in his tracks and turned towards me. In a flash, the bull rushed at him, roaring, and tossed him on his horns. The black silhouette of the dog leapt out in the twilight and dropped plump into the middle of the herd. His fall had the effect of a bombshell. The cows stampeded, snorting and butting each other with a clash of horns, while the dust rose in a cloud. I waited in an agony of suspense to hear the death scream, but there was not a sound.

Meanwhile the cowherds had come running up, cracking their whips and shouting. The road cleared and I saw Arcturus. He was lying in the dust, himself like a heap of dust or an old rag thrown into the road-

way. Then, stirring, he staggered to his feet and hobbled towards the roadside. One of the cowherds noticed him.

"Ah, it's a dog! " he cried gleefully, then swore and lashed out at him deftly with his long whip. Arcturus did not yelp. He merely shrank, turned his blind eyes for a moment towards the cowherd, staggered to the edge of the ditch, slipped and fell.

The bull stood in the middle of the road, pawing the ground and bellowing. The cowherd treated him, too, to a stinging lash of the whip, upon which he immediately calmed down. The cows quietened down, too, and the herd moved on again at a leisurely pace, raising a dairy-smelling dust and leaving dung cakes in the road.

I went up to Arcturus. He was covered with mud, breathing heavily, with lolling tongue. There were wet weals on his sides. His hind paw quivered—it was crushed. I laid my hand on his head and spoke to him, but he did not respond. His entire being expressed pain, perplexity and a sense of grievance. He could not understand why he had been whipped and trampled on. Dogs usually whimper in such cases, but Arcturus didn't.

4

Arcturus would have remained an ordinary house dog and perhaps grown fat and lazy but for a happy accident which gave exalted and heroic meaning to the rest of his life.

It came about in this way. I went to the forest one

morning to admire the last riotous flashes of summer before it faded and died. Arcturus tagged along after me. I shooed him back several times. He squatted down at a distance, then ran after me again. I got tired of his odd persistence, and took no further notice of him.

The forest staggered Arcturus. Back there, in town, everything was familiar to him. There were boardwalks there, wide roads, planks on the river bank, and smooth footpaths. Here unfamiliar objects assailed him from all sides: the tall, already stiff grass, the prickly bushes, the rotting stumps, the fallen trees, the supple young pines and firs, the rustling leaves on the ground. From all sides things touched, pricked and grazed him, as if all had conspired together to drive him out of the woods. And the smells—the smells! So many of them, all unfamiliar and frightening, strong and faint, the meaning of which he knew not! Arcturus ran into all these odorous, rustling, crackling and prickly objects. He shrank at every contact, snorted, and cowered at my feet. He was bewildered and terrified.

"Ah, Arcturus! " I said to him softly. "Poor doggie! You don't know that there is a bright sun in this world, you don't know how green the trees and bushes are in the morning, and how brightly the dew sparkles in the grass; you don't know how full of flowers the world is—white, yellow, blue and red, and how tenderly the clusters of ashberries and the sweetbriar glow amid the grey firs and yellowing leaves. If you saw the moon and stars at night, you might bark at them with pleasure. How can you know that the horses, dogs and cats are all different colours, that

fences can be brown, or green, or simply grey, and what a blaze the window-panes make at sundown, what a flaming sea the river then is. If you were a normal healthy dog, your master would be a sportsman. You would hear, then, in the morning, the rousing song of the horn and the wild shouts of the hunters—no ordinary men ever shout like that. You would pursue the game, frenzied with excitement, barking furiously, and in this would be your service to your lord and master. No service you could render him would be nobler than this. Ah, poor Arcturus, poor hound! "

I spoke to him softly, reassuringly, as I went deeper and deeper into the forest. Arcturus recovered himself little by little, and began to explore the bushes and tree-stumps. How novel everything was, how fascinating! He was so busy now, investigating, that he no longer clung to me. Occasionally he would stop, peering in my direction with blind white eyes and listening to make sure that he was doing right and that I was following him, then he would go off on his rambles again.

Presently we came out into a clearing and walked through the underbrush. Arcturus was agog with excitement. He weaved through the bushes, snatching at the grass and stumbling over the tussocky ground. He breathed heavily as he forced his way ahead, taking no further notice either of me or of the prickly branches. At last he took the plunge and crashed headlong into the bushes, where he could be heard snorting and rummaging about. "He's unearthed something! " I thought, and stopped.

A tentative bark came from out of the bushes.

"Arcturus! " I called him anxiously. At that moment something happened. Arcturus, with a loud yelp and a howl, plunged into the thick of the bushes. The howl quickly changed to an excited bark, and I could follow his movements through the bushes by their quivering tops. I ran to head him off, calling him loudly all the time, but my cries only seemed to goad him on. Stumbling and panting, I ran through a clearing, then another, descended a hollow, and raced through it as fast as I could to intercept him. I emerged into a clearing and there I saw Arcturus. He bounded out of the bushes, making straight for me. He was unrecognizable. He ran comically in a series of high leaps, not the way ordinary dogs do, but none the less confidently followed the scent, baying furiously all the time. Every now and then his voice rose to a puppy-like yelp.

"Arcturus! " I shouted. My cry put him off his stroke and gave me time to rush up to him and seize him by the collar. He struggled and snarled and all but bit me, and it was quite a time before I got him calmed down. He was badly bruised and scratched, and held his left ear to the ground. Apparently he had hurt himself, but was worked up to such a pitch of excitement and passion that he did not feel it.

5

From that day his life took a different turn. Every morning he ran off to the forest and did not return until the evening, sometimes the next day. He came

home always utterly exhausted and bruised, with bloodshot eyes. He had grown considerably during that time—his chest had developed, his voice had grown stronger, and his paws had become dry and powerful, like steel springs.

How he managed to follow the trail there alone without killing himself was beyond me. He must have felt, though, that this lone hunting of his was not what it should be, that something was missing. Perhaps he missed the human approval and encouragement that are so necessary to every hunting dog.

I had never seen him come back from the forest sated. He ran with the slow awkward gait of the blind, and never ran down his quarry, never got his teeth into it. The forest to him was a silent enemy. It lashed his muzzle and eyes, it flung itself under his feet, it stopped him when he ran. All that it had for him was scent, wild, exciting, alluring scent, ineffably beautiful and hostile. One among thousands, it led him on, forever onward.

How did he find his way home after his mad race, when he was brought down to earth from his ecstatic dreams? What a sense of space and topography, what a powerful instinct he must have had to be able to find his way back after coming to himself, utterly worn-out, hoarse-voiced, and panting, somewhere in the dense forest miles away from home with nothing all round him but rustling grasses and the smell of damp gullies!

Every hunting dog needs the encouragement of man. The hound will forget everything in the excitement of the chase, but he will never forget that somewhere near by is his master the hunter, seized with the same pas-

sion as himself, and that when the time comes his shot will decide the issue. At such moments the master's voice becomes wild with passion, and this communicates itself to the dog. He, too, helps the dog to follow the scent by running round the bushes, yelling hoarsely, egging him on. And when it is all over the master will toss his dog a hare foot, look at him with wild, happy, drunken eyes, shout with delight, "Well done, my boy! " and rumple his ears.

Arcturus was lonely and miserable in this respect. He was torn between love for his master and his passion for the chase. Several times I saw him crawl out from under the verandah in the morning—he liked to sleep there—and after a run round the garden, sit down under his master's window and wait for him to wake up. He had always done that, and if the doctor, waking up in a good humour, looked out of the window and called, "Arcturus! ", the dog used to go crazy with joy. He would go close up to the window, and throw his head back, his throat twitching and his body swaying as he shuffled from foot to foot. Then he would go inside, and they would start romping about in there amid a medley of happy sounds, the doctor singing his arias, the dog scampering through the rooms.

He still waited there for the doctor to get up, but now betrayed signs of uneasiness. He had nervous twitches, he scratched and shook himself, looked up, stood up and sat down again and would start whimpering softly. Then he would begin to run round the verandah in widening circles, then sit down again under the window and even give short impatient barks, ears erect and head cocked now to one side, now to the other, listen-

ing. Finally he would get up, stretch himself nervously, yawn, and make for the gap in the fence with an air of decision. After a while I would see him far out in the field, trotting along in his strained, hesitant manner. He was making for the forest.

6

I was walking once with my gun along the high bank of a narrow lake.

The ducks that year were remarkably plump and abundant. There were lots of snipe in the low-lying places and the shooting was easy and pleasurable.

I sat down to rest on a stump, and when the flurry of wind had died down, leaving a moment of brooding stillness, I suddenly caught an odd sound somewhere far away. It was as if someone was steadily striking a silver bell, and the mellow note stole through the fir grove, lingered among the pines and echoed through the whole forest, lending a touch of solemnity to everything around. Gradually the sound grew more distinct and concentrated, and I realized that a dog was barking somewhere. It was a clear, faint, distant bark, coming from the dense pine forest on the opposite bank of the lake. At moments it was lost altogether, but then it came again, as persistent as ever, always a bit nearer and louder.

I was sitting on the stump, gazing around at the yellowed thinning foliage of the birches, and the greying moss with the crimson aspen leaves on it showing at a distance, and it seemed to me, as I listened to the sil-

very bark, that the whole forest was listening with me—the hidden squirrels and the grouse, the birch-trees, the crowding green firs and the lake below, and the quivering webs woven by the spiders. Presently, in that sweet musical bark, I caught a familiar note, and suddenly it struck me that this was Arcturus on the trail.

At last I had heard him! The pines threw back a faint silvery echo and this made it seem as if several dogs were barking at once. Arcturus was suddenly silent—apparently he had got off the trail. The silence lasted for several long minutes, and the forest immediately became empty and dead. I could almost see the hound circling, blinking his white eyes, trusting to his scent alone. Perhaps he had run into a tree? Perhaps he was lying at this moment with a broken chest, bleeding and agonized, unable to raise himself?

The pursuit was taken up again with redoubled vigour, this time much nearer to the lake. This lake was so situated that all trails and footpaths ran down to it. I had seen many an interesting thing by that lake. Now, too, I waited to see what would happen. After a while a fox bounded out into a small clearing, brown with horse sorrel, on the other side. It was dun-grey, with a thin skimpy tail. For a moment it stopped with raised forepaw and ears erect, listening to the sounds of approaching pursuit. Then leisurely it trotted across the clearing to the fringe of the wood, plunged into a gully and vanished in the underbrush. Arcturus dashed out into the clearing in full cry. He ran a little wide off the trail, baying furiously all the time, and making high awkward leaps as he ran. He plunged into the gully

after the fox, crashed through the underbrush, then yelped and howled there, struggled out of some difficult spot in silence, and began baying again in deep measured tones, as if striking a silver bell.

Hound and beast, the ever-warring pair, flashed past me as if in some strange theatre. I was alone again with the silence and the distant bark of the dog.

7

The fame of this remarkable hound spread throughout the town and the countryside. He had been seen at the distant river Losva, in the fields across the wooded hills, and on the remote forest trails. People spoke about him in the villages, at the landing-stages and ferries, and the raftsmen and saw-mill workers discussed him over a mug of beer.

Hunters started calling at our house. As a rule, they did not believe all these rumours—they were not to be taken in by hunters' yarns. They examined Arcturus, discussed his ears and paws, talked about his build and toughness and other points of the sporting dog. They found all kinds of faults and tried to persuade the doctor to sell him. They were dying to feel Arcturus's muscles, his chest and paws, but he sat at his master's feet with an air of such wary grimness that they dared not reach out a hand. The doctor, red and angry, told them again and again that the dog was not for sale, and it was time they all knew it. The hunters would go away disappointed, to be followed by others bound on the same errand.

One day Arcturus, badly bruised after one of his hunting forays, was lying under the verandah, when an old man came into the garden. He had an empty eye socket and a scraggy little Tatar's beard, and was wearing a battered old cap and run-down hunting-boots. Seeing me, the old man started blinking, pulled off his cap, scratched his head and looked up at the sky.

"The weather these days, the weather..." he began vaguely, then grunted and fell silent. I guessed what he was after.

"You've come about the dog?" I said.

"Yes, yes! " he said quickly, putting on his cap. "Now look, is that right? What does the doctor want with dog? He not want dog, but I do, I need dog badly. Soon we go hunting. I have dog, but him no good—he's a fool-dog, no nose, no voice, no nothing. And this one is blind, mind you! A dog in a thousand, so help me God! "

I told him he should better see the dog's master. He sighed, blew his nose and went inside. Five minutes later he reappeared looking very red and crestfallen. He stopped next to me, grunted, and took a long time lighting a cigarette. Then he frowned.

"Did he refuse you?" I asked, knowing beforehand what his answer would be.

"Did he! " he exclaimed with annoyance. "It's a shame, I tell you. I been hunting from a child. See, I lost my eye—and I have sons as well. I tell you, we want this doggie badly! But he say—no! I give him five hundred—but he don't want to listen! Was he wild! It's me who should be wild, not him! Hunting time is coming and I have no dog! "

He looked round the garden and at the fence with an air of perplexity, then suddenly a crafty look flashed across his face. He calmed down at once.

"Where do you keep him?" he asked in a casual sort of way, blinking his eye.

"You don't intend to steal him, do you?" I said.

The old man was taken aback. He took off his cap, wiped his face with the lining and looked at me closely.

"God forbid! " he said with a laugh. "What a thing to say, God bless you. Now tell me, what do he want a dog for, I ask you?"

He made for the gate, then stopped and looked at me joyfully.

"What a voice! What a voice, I tell you! A clear spring! "

Then he came back, went up to me and whispered, winking his one eye at the windows of the house:

"You wait, the dog will be mine. What he want a dog for? He's a man of brains, not a hunter. He will sell me that dog, I tell you, so help me God! We'll think up something. Ah, well, well! "

As soon as the old man had gone, the doctor walked briskly into the garden.

"What's he been telling you here?" he said anxiously. "What a nasty old fellow! Did you notice the ugly look in his eye? He's up to no good."

The doctor rubbed his hands nervously. His neck was red and a grey tuft of hair drooped over his forehead. Arcturus crawled out from under the verandah at the sound of his voice and limped towards us.

"Arcturus! " the doctor said. "You'll never play me

false, will you?"

Arcturus shut his eyes and poked his muzzle into the doctor's knees. He sat down on his haunches, too weak to stand. His head drooped, and he almost slept. The doctor gave me a pleased look, laughed and patted his head. He did not know that the hound had already played him false, had betrayed him from the moment he had gone into the forest with me.

8

August was drawing to a close and the weather had changed for the worse. I was preparing to leave, when Arcturus disappeared. He had gone to the forest in the morning and had not returned in the evening, nor the next day, nor the day after that.

When a friend you have been living with and seeing every day without giving much thought to suddenly goes away never to return, all that you are left with are memories.

I recalled all the days which I had spent with Arcturus, his lack of confidence, his perplexity, his ungainly sidling trot, his voice, endearing habits, his adoration of his master, even his odour, the odour of a clean healthy dog. I remembered all this and was sorry that he was not my dog, that it was not I who had given him his name, that it was not me he loved and not to my house that he returned in the dark, when he came to himself after the mad chase, miles away from home.

The doctor had a drawn look these last few days. He immediately suspected the one-eyed old man, and we

searched him a long time before we found him. But the old man swore that he had not seen Arcturus, and offered to join us in the search.

The news of Arcturus's disappearance spread swiftly throughout the town. It turned out that many people knew him and loved him and everyone was eager to help the doctor in his search. Conjecture ran wild. Some had seen a dog who resembled Arcturus, others had heard his bark in the forest.

The children whom the doctor treated, together with others he did not even know, combed the woods, shouting and calling, shooting, exploring every forest trail, and called on the doctor ten times a day to find out whether the wonder hound had turned up.

I took no part in the search. Somehow I could not believe that Arcturus could lose himself. He had too good a scent for that. And he was too strongly attached to his master to have deserted him for some hunter. He had perished, of course... But how, where—that I did not know. There are so many ways of dying!

This was borne in upon the doctor too after several days. He suddenly became a saddened man. He sang no more, and lay awake in the evenings for a long time. The house became empty and quiet without Arcturus. The cats had the freedom of the garden again, and no one sniffed the boulder by the river any more. It stood there dark, dreary and useless, wasting its smells on the empty air.

On the day of my departure the doctor and I studiously avoided the subject of Arcturus. Only once did the doctor express his regret at not having become a hunter in his youth.

9

A couple of years later I visited those parts again and stayed with the doctor. He was still living alone. No one pattered across the floor, sniffed and snorted, or thumped his tail on the wicker furniture. The house was silent, and the rooms smelt of dust, drugs and fusty wallpaper.

It was spring, however, and the empty house was not depressing. The buds were bursting in the garden, the sparrows were uproarious, the rooks were fussily setting up housekeeping in the town park, and the doctor sang his arias in the thinnest of falsettoes. A blue mist hung over the town in the mornings, the brimming river spread as far as the eye could reach, swans rested in the flooded parts and rose in the mornings with their perpetual "klink-klank", the spry steam launches hooted gaily, and the plodding tugs blew long blasts on their horns. They were cheering sights and sounds!

The day after my arrival I went out shooting. The forest was wrapped in a golden haze, and was full of dripping, tinkling, gurgling sounds. The thawed earth gave off a strong heady smell, in which all the other odours of the forest—those of asp bark, rotting wood, and wet leaves—were drowned.

It was a fine evening with the sky a flaming sea of sunset. The woodcocks were plentiful. I killed four and could barely find them among the dark litter of leaves. When the glow of sunset faded into green, and the first stars peeped out, I made my way slowly homeward along a familiar unused track, avoiding the wide

pools, in which the sky, the bare birches and the stars were reflected.

Skirting one of these pools along the brow of a hillock I suddenly saw something gleaming in front of me, and thought at first that it was a patch of lingering snow. But on approaching closer I saw that it was the bones of a dog lying scattered on the ground. I examined them closely with a beating heart, and saw a familiar dog-collar with a brass buckle that had turned green. Yes, these were the remains of Arcturus.

I carefully examined the spot in the gathering darkness and formed a clear idea of what had happened. A young but already dry fir-tree had a lower branch; like the whole tree, it had dried, shed its needles and worn itself down to a bare sharp stick. Arcturus had run headlong into that stick when he was following the hot smelly trail, hearing nothing, knowing nothing but that scent which lured him ever on and on.

I proceeded on my way in utter darkness and came out on the edge of the forest, where, squelching over the wet ground, I found the road homeward. But my thoughts kept returning to that hillock with the dry broken fir-tree.

Hunters have a weakness for loud-sounding names. What a variety of them one can find among hunting dogs! We have Diana and Antaeus, Phoebus and Nero, Venus and Romulus. But probably no dog had been worthier of such a noble name, the name of an unfading blue star.

Bura*

To the lonely young camel tethered up for all the time.

The author

Bura tore with a bellow through the aul of Kazak-bai, and there was damnation in his cry.

1

When a man waits for morning to bring deliverance, his eyes grow rounded in the night. Sorrow leans over him, driving away timorous dreams. And so does any living creature pine if he is deprived of friends with

* English translation © Raduga Publishers 1986

whom he once shared days filled with merry games and good-natured squabbles. Bura, a black camel, did not regret the past, which flitted by like a ray of sunlight. But often, causing himself a sweet pain, he would wander along the soft sand dunes of the past, and the Sahara became for him a reality. The wind would ruffle the fine hairs on his slender neck as he walked and walked after his mirage, after hope, which always dies last in the soul. Even an attentive glance would reveal only a calm, stately giant, rhythmically chewing his cud and looking out indifferently upon the earth. Bura was too proud to allow his feelings to show. He paced silently along, leading along a caravan of days turned to shadows, and his pain was incomprehensible and inchoate. And although people often say: "as weepy as a camel", his large eyes were dry, and only specks of the setting sun floated in them. Bura had lost everything, but no one heard him moan. Ever since the rush had sent up its plumes and the grass had begun reaching up towards the sun, he had kept himself at a distance from the aul. Had he forgotten the place where he had been given care and kindness? No. There was no place dearer to his heart, more beautiful and warm. But he had abandoned it. He would have remained, if he could have forgotten the moist eyes of his mother, whom they had butchered for meat before his eyes. He would have remained, if the harmonious constellation of his brothers had not suddenly disintegrated into fragments, each a wound to his heart. His small, warm tribe had been driven to a strange aul beyond the Bukhtarma.

They had driven them away pitilessly to different

corners of the land, sundered the tender threads that bound them together, spurned them as lepers, innocent before God and man. A bear-spear, aimed by a cruel hand, had pierced his heart, and it was as terrifying as the forked tongue of a snake. What were the camels guilty of?..

And an animal can pine away. For six months Bura had avoided his aul. But as soon as the green grasses reached up towards the sun, he was irrepressibly drawn towards the mountains. The Altai is a bounteous and beautiful land. Forty different peoples and tribes call it their home. There is enough room here for all. The snowy peaks give shelter to the floating clouds. The valleys are quiet and green.

The tiresome wind came whistling continually from the mountains, swaying the thick, silvery feather-grass, giving it the semblance of a raging sea tossing beneath the violent gusts of a storm. Uninhabited and sombre, the valley extended to the foothills. Only in the spring did it come to life, when the people migrated to the mountains and the air all around became filled with laughter, shouting and songs. But for a hill or barrow raising its heavy head, the monotonous steppe stretched to the mountains. Here and there were visible the ruins of abandoned houses or old mausoleums. The sun-bleached bare patches were like salt marshes. It was a gloomy place. But what did it matter? Whether picturesque or gloomy—there was no place dearer to Bura. Bura strode forward, and the hill flowed beneath his legs.

It was not the first time he had taken this difficult, winding path to the alpine pastures. But it was the first

time he was so alone. In years gone by this path had been light and cheerful. As soon as the steppe became just barely covered with grass, people would gather together their belongings and set out on their way. They all went together. The heaviest loads were carried by the strong and experienced camels and horses. The foals and camel calves would scamper alongside, never falling behind, and no one drove them on. When autumn had put on its golden robe and the grasses had turned a humble yellow, the people would descend into the valleys, and the caravan would file along the old path like the great shadow of a flock of cranes, speeding on towards warmer climes. Everyone was gay and full of health. Even the humps on the labouring camels, who had been given no rest, jutted up tautly. Those were happy times.

Bura stopped at the beginning of the path that led up to the pass. Here, at the start of the difficult ascent, his mother would usually give him a feed of warm milk. Perhaps he actually recalled that distant, sweet time. Or perhaps he was simply weary from the long monotonous journey. His nostrils had been torn by a loop of rope. Bura reluctantly sniffed the grasses, but he was not hungry. He stretched out his long neck and gazed for a long time at the pass. Then he turned his head slowly and looked around. To the right, beneath the Tasshoky Mountain, was an old winter camp. Here the sheep herd took shelter from the frost, and as soon as the snow melted, it was driven out beyond the pass. Bura headed towards the sheepfold. This was an unsightly place. Broken sledge runners, fragments of bottles, the top of an old boot, piles of sheep dung, a

dirty bird's feather. The stench of mould and decay poisoned the air. Bura slowly approached the wooden trough, which was cracked from the sun, wind and passage of time. Collected at one end was rusty water, accumulated after recent downpours, and at the other were cakes of coarse, dirty salt. Bura lowered his head and greedily licked the salt. Evidently they had poured fuel oil here earlier, and the camel raised its head and snorted with displeasure. Then he made his way towards the empty fold. Big yellow flies thronged over the manure and flew up noisily from beneath Bura's squelching hooves. The yard was already overgrown with thistle. Scattered here and there were stiff stalks of straw left from the sheep's fodder. Bura stretched out his neck and crunched on the stalks, even though there was much fresh grass growing all around. Then he rubbed his mangy flank against the wooden corner post with pleasure, and moved on towards the pass.

From a distance he could have been a large beetle. Not an enormous camel, but a speck of sand in this deserted kingdom, the only living soul in all the earth. And he carried a heavy burden—the entire weight of centuries of silence and loneliness. Time had overtaken his unhurried pace. Lagging behind the epoch, he ambled along alone, and there was no life in his eyes. Bura did not know that he was still very much needed by people, and that his present solitary existence was the result of a misunderstanding. He was led into the distance by hurt and resentment. But resentment is blind. Bura paced along, large among men and small among mountains. But what can be said of a camel, when man himself would abandon his home in a huff,

condemning himself to deep, eternal heartache.

The sun was nearing the western horizon when Bura came out on to the pass. From here the edge of the familiar summer pasture was already visible. Farther on stretched hills overgrown with thick woods.

Bura's pace grew more lively as he drew nearer the familiar places. Along the way he stopped and drank his fill of the unruly mountain stream Kairakta, which seethed with a cold fury, and chewed some grass on the bank which smelled of mint and was bitter, like a far-off memory. He did not linger here. Bura saw a round, burnt-out clearing—on this spot stood a yurt. For a long time he inhaled the familiar scents and could not leave, trying to remember something very important. Nothing could distract him, neither the sun, red with weariness, returning to its golden palace, nor the harmonious concert of frogs attired in emerald velvet coats, nor the cries of the mountain goats. He searched agonizingly and persistently in his memory.

Wise-spiteful crows were perched on a post dried up from the sun and wind. "Foul birds! " The camel stuck out his lip contemptuously and began to scratch itself on the post. The crows flew up heavily into the air. And all at once the black camel seemed to remember something. He turned his head and looked at the spot where the yurt had stood. Once again there was smoke above the hearth. A large yurt stood in the center of the burnt-out circular plot. Fifteen fine racers trampled the ground with their hooves nearby. A little to the side fuzzy lambs were bleating and a small shepherd was chewing on a piece of sheep's cheese. Out of the yurt came the camel-herder Abish

with a staff in his hand. All were here, only Bura did not see his camels. They weren't in the aul. He thought he could hear the plaintive cry of a newly born white-foreheaded camel calf, coming from the reeds. Bura's nostrils swelled with compassion and he sobbed loudly. The white yurt faded away, the swift horses disappeared, and the cry of the camel calf died down. A wind came racing from the north, and the tulips bowed down belatedly after it.

But even the old stopping place did not keep Bura. He moved further into the mountains. Every tree, every stone here was familiar. A warm trembling passed under his skin. And Bura was seized with a new desire. It had been noisy and gay at the former camp grounds, but not once had he been to the summit of the mountain. What reason had there been for him to go there before, to the bare mountain top, when he was surrounded by friends and the slopes were full of sweet grasses. But what does not despair, the despair of loneliness, force one to do--not only Bura, but man too! His legs were already faltering from weariness and his heavy head was drooping towards the earth, but he ascended the mountain. And the humans' settlement now lay at his feet, and the Bukhtarma wound like a silver ribbon. In the smoke, in the fog lay his native aul. Bura had not seen it for a long time. Now it appeared small and melancholy to the camel. He hadn't noticed this while he lived there. But perhaps now he only took notice of grey and unattractive things. Resentment was like a thorn in his flesh. Bura carefully studied everything around: ravines, summits, forests. He stretched out his neck and looked in all

four directions. God! How had he failed to see it before? Winding along the Ulystau Mountain was a road worn down by nomad caravans. Where did it begin and where did it lead? Whose road was it? Who passed along it? Its deserted track stretched across the bald mountain, coiled like a rope, slithered like a snake. The years had gone by, but the road had remained open. And it was unlike other paths which Bura had walked upon. No, he had never taken this road, nor had his brothers, from whom he was now separated. It had been laid by his ancestors. Heavy and shaggy, even wilder than he was now, hardy and patient, they had stamped out this path, irrigated it with their sweat, and no grass had been growing there to this day. Even then they made their way to different ends of the earth, submissive to the will of man, their master. They carried burdens, bales with goods, human tears, hopes and joys on their ugly humps. They had seen bloodshed. And they had had occasion to carry their wounded masters away from death, from the hands of their enemies. Strange creatures, the slaves of Allah, killing one another! Camel's milk had saved humans and their hairless children more than once. Life flowed from the teats of the she-camels.

"Distant, long road! We traversed you, and you remained a memorial to us. You were trodden by camels. May this never be said as a reproach..."

Bura was seized with a feeling of alarm. His eyes blazed with fury. He wanted to strike himself against the earth in despair. "Even if the weight of the whole aul was upon me it wouldn't feel overloaded, and I

would make my way to any destination and would never grow weary. Why am I alone! " Bura wanted to cry but could not.

...His tender childhood had begun with kindness and joy. When he lay, still wet and helpless, they had taken him from his mother and carried him into the yurt. For ten days they had kept him there, hiding him from outsiders. The pockmarked wife of the camel herder Abish never left the calf's side. When he began to raise himself up on his disobedient, trembling legs, his large black eyes clouded with fright, Abish's wife fed him melted sheep fat, and her pockmarked face was kindly. When they let him run free for the first time in the sun-drenched clearing in front of the yurt, he had swayed unsteadily on his weak legs, his head reeling with rapture, and he had tried to run towards the sugar-topped mountains. He would not forget that full happiness of his childhood, when he was caressed by the work-worn hands of Abish and the warm palms of his pockmarked wife. O Life!

Small Bura, barely able to stand on his legs, had lost his mother. They had loaded her down with salt and led her away. That salt had been bitter for his mother, and for him, still an uncomprehending creature. He wandered off to the birch wood to search for his white mother. Everything around was flooded with moonlight, and it was somehow the color of his mother's milk. Dark shadows slipped ominously and silently above the treetops. Birds flapped their wings in alarm. And the terror-stricken young camel could no longer even cry. He simply wanted to hide, to see nothing. But then his fear suddenly vanished, and he felt him-

self a part of the mysterious workings of nature, and he was no longer frightened, neither by the agitated birds, nor the fleet-footed hares. Everything became like an old dream which he had dreamt once, centuries ago, and of which he himself was a part. All of a sudden something whistled out in the night and fastened like a snake around his long neck. A hair lasso! A terrible force dragged him, and he felt a constricting pain in his throat. What happened after that the young camel did not comprehend. He submitted to this crude force. And how could he have done otherwise? He understood only that he had been taken captive by strange humans who did not smell like Abish. When at last he came to, he felt familiar hands tenderly stroking the place on his neck where the iron grip of others had caused him pain. He opened his eyes and saw Abish. Now he was calm. Once again he heard the familiar voice of his master: "Silly little fellow... How could they plan to slaughter you?.. As if your meat could have lasted those human wolves for the winter. Killing such a youngster would be nothing less than murder. Cruel people! "

Bura's tears rolled like peas down onto the age-old dust of the nomad path.

Sounds carry from far off, breathing life into these silent mountains and dead stones. Barely audible, they float here like the breathing of a sleeping child. These are not the shouts of a horse herder, the voice of a forest warden, the cries of nocturnal birds. They are like a quiet song yearning somewhere in the distance. These mournful sounds float over the mountains, casting upon them marvellous dreams. The Tasshoky pass

slumbered. There was not even the faintest breeze. Peace. The loud-winged ducks had grown quiet, the merry crickets had fallen silent, and only the sad sounds grew steadily, touching the heart with their mournful melody.

The beautiful song was full of regret, entreaty, expectation. It seemed, the mountains grew dark with compassion. The mysterious forest was also silent, also listening. The heart ached from this song. But was it really a song? The sounds were not like an ordinary camel's cry, it was something else, incomprehensible, never heard before, unlike no other song. The cry of a grieving heart, entreaty and despair? No, no! Perhaps it was resentment which was rushing above the mountains, so vast that even here it's crowded and suffocating? No. Or maybe it was funeral lamentation? Again, no. It was incurable bitterness, deeply concealed longing. It was terror before the misty, gloomy dawn, which boded no good. Yes, those moanings were impossible to repeat. The melody of the lament bursting into the night resembled neither "Elimai", nor "Korlan" and "Zhanbota", nor even the light "Mendy Kyz" and "Aimazhan". The mountains filled with blackness. Night descended. Bura, weeping, did not leave the path, and the darkness grew even deeper.

2

The disappearance of black Bura did not alter in any significant way life in the aul of Kazakbai. But Bura had been absent for a year now. In former times, when

they camped along the Kyzylkain, something like this would never have happened. Then everyone would have mounted their horses, even if it was only a button that had been lost, and searched for it until they found it. Since then the aul had spread out, many new houses had sprung up, things were now done on a large scale, and people visited one another less frequently, and it was only grief and holidays which brought them together. Only Abish was unsettled by black Bura's disappearance. He had tended camels all his life, and perhaps that was why the last, Bura, was especially dear to him. When the camel disappeared, old Abish, in a fit of temper, swore soundly at the collective-farm management. He even ceased going to work. He thought that the foreman would call him back, but no one came near his door. In vain Abish waited and hoped. And he was filled with bitterness. The proud, stubborn man thought up an illness, lumbago, in the small of his back and did not rise from his bed for a long time. He was not accustomed to going begging. Every now and then his grandson would look in on him:

"Grandfather," he said, "our Bura is roaming at the foot of the Tasshoky. He was seen in Terkuys."

The grandson would bring rumours of Bura to the old man, trying to soothe him. Abish thought of going himself in search of Bura, but he had no horse. And he could not bring himself to go and ask the livestock manager.

"Bura was torn to pieces by wolves! " his grandson cried once, bursting into the yurt.

The old man jumped up from his stove-bench. His

face was distorted with rage.

"Don't go talking nonsense!" he roared. "Remember, young pup, Bura and I will never become food for wolves and enemies!"

3

But by this time Bura had crossed over into the sands of Naryn country. The days had turned cold. A small snowfall had turned into a full-fledged blizzard, and raged for several days. Thickets of rushes trembled submissively beneath the gusts of wind, and broke with a crunch beneath the heavy hooves of frozen Bura. For a long time he tried to hold out against the cold, but the blizzard lashed maliciously against his sunken flanks, shattering his bones. Bura roamed along the railroad track—here the rushes grew thicker and there was more of forage.

Several years earlier, when they had discovered copper ore in these parts, Bura was still young and uncomprehending. They had begun laying down the rails. Paying no attention to Bura's youth, they had ordered Abish to train him to carry loads. Bura had not been as obstinate as his brother Akpas, and quickly mastered the uncomplicated art. He carried sleepers, sand, rocks and heavy rails. This was the time when not even the youngest camel was left in the aul of Kazakbai. All the animals were driven out to help with the construction. The whole camel tribe experienced the heavy burden of labor on this railroad, which stretches far into the East. After that the camels no longer had to endure

such heavy work. This was the last.

From childhood black Bura was calm and obedient, not like Akpas. The most outrageous thing he had ever done was to spit lavishly during mating season. True, in a fit of fury he would sometimes chase after whomever happened to be around. But once, in February, Akpas went totally berserk with rage. He tore along blaring loudly, with bared teeth and great drops of froth dropping from his mouth. The collective-farm livestock specialist passed by, completely unsuspecting, and the half-crazed Akpas suddenly took after him. It was lucky that the rider had a swift horse beneath him. At first the distance between them did not diminish, but Akpas continued after the horse with a blind fury. In several bounds the panic-stricken horse dashed across the ice of the river Karasu which stood in their path. Akpas, falling down onto his front knees, flung out his hind legs and went sliding across the river. It was as if he had known that he wouldn't have maintained his footing. The livestock specialist, not anticipating such an action from a camel, was horrified. Spurring on the horse, he went racing towards the woods. But he knew that he would not be able to escape. He struck the horse with his whip, and as they passed beneath a tall tree, he grabbed onto a branch and scrambled like a cat almost to the very top. Akpas rubbed for a long time against the trunk, trying to topple the tree down together with the human. Then, craning his neck, he looked up. Dripping froth, he stomped the earth and tore it up, and then laid down beneath the tree, prepared to wait out his enemy, an eternity if need be. His jaws moved evenly, gathering the foul-smelling saliva,

chewing the cud.

At the time Abish was ill and lay in the regional hospital. No one else could pacify Akpas. The livestock specialist had to be saved, and so they shot Akpas.

Black Bura was not like his brother. But now something was happening to him. For two weeks he ate nothing, obedient to the call of nature. His eyes became engorged with blood, blinding, terrible during mating time. Perhaps it was the result of his long solitude? But he roamed, restless and agitated, spraying foam, gnashing his teeth. The deserted steppe heard his desperate "Boo! Boo! " If he had encountered something Bura would have tramped, crushed, destroyed it. But there was nobody in the barren steppe besides himself. Not even a mouse scampered by, nor did a bird cast a shadow on the plain.

Now Bura resembled his spiteful brother Akpas. But Akpas had grown maddened from idleness, and this one, it seemed, was stricken by loneliness. His eyes were sunken in from hunger, his unkempt coat was tangled, and the shedding hair intermingled with the new coat, hung in tufts on his belly. Bald patches showed on his body, his humps had shrunk and no longer jutted up as they once had.

Bura was restless. More and more frequently his "Boo! Boo! " resounded. It seemed as if the dawn of the short winter's day had just broken, and then you'd look and it was already evening. All around was the motionless, dead steppe, a lifeless plain. The blizzard which had howled like a she-wolf all night long finally subsided towards morning. But Bura continued

searching for some living creature. For long stretches of time he would stare into the deceptive and hopeless distance. He stared until his eyes ached. He wanted to bellow out from despair, but his mouth was filled with bitter saliva. He wanted to sob, but there were no tears. He wanted to die, but it seemed death was in no hurry to come. What could he do? Where could he go? To the aul? God forbid! There they would shoot him down, as they had Akpas. And he did not deserve such a death. "Boo-boo-boo! "

"Oo-o-o! " the locomotive answered shrilly. Bura started up. He didn't know that a train was approaching. A voice! He had heard a voice! Ancient memory prompted him that he had already heard this sound before. Maybe this was the way male camels challenged one another to battle for the possession of a white female with large, moist eyes, dreaming of things never to be. Struck once again by longing, Bura made his way towards the commanding voice.

A black plume of smoke hung above the bend of the road, the wheels pounded at the rail joints. Wagons loaded with timber, coal, and iron flowed in a great caravan. Now the train drew alongside Bura. Bura bellowed, and a thick, heavy fury blinded him. He didn't stop to think that he was small and weak compared to this great creature. He threw his tortured body straight at the train. Froth flew from his mouth in great snowy flakes. His breath came bursting from his nostrils like clouds of steam. He was driven by one desire—to overturn and trample the train. And he threw the whole weight of his chest against a wagon. A terrible force crumpled him and flung him aside. The

locomotive cried out. And the indifferent wagons tore past prostrated Bura. Bura lay off to the side of the tracks with a crushed chest. Blood, mingled with froth, flowed from his mouth. His body was wracked with agony. And he was travelling upon a golden, sultry ocean, inhaling the smells of powerful spices, and the bronze bell on his neck foretold a long, long journey.

Spasms convulsed Bura's legs. He took a deep wheezing breath, his last in this world. And a single, clear tear rolled belatedly from his lifeless eye. The steppe turned rigid from grief. It was locked in a long silence. It was orphaned, now that the last camel from the aul of Kazakbai, had perished.

* * *

The still bed-ridden old camel-herder Abish, learning of Bura's death, went that very day to the livestock manager to ask for a horse.

"After all, he did a lot of work in his time. It would be cruel to leave his bones just lying in the steppe. He should be brought back and given a proper burial. Maybe his hair will still be good for something."

"Nonsense! Man is mortal too. What's the sense of sending a horse out into the steppe after a stupid camel! " the boss refused. Insulted, Abish returned home, his bridle behind his back. But the old man did not forget black Bura.

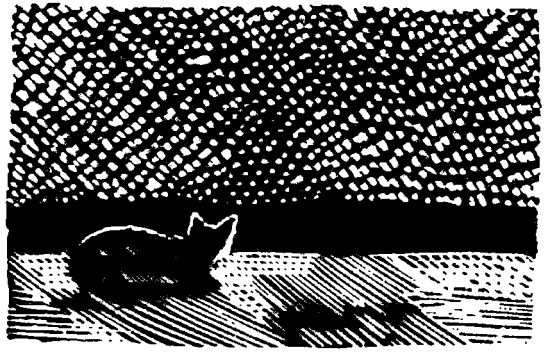
As soon as it turned warmer and the snow had begun to melt, he took his grandson with him and walked on foot to Naryn sands. There he drove the loathsome

flies from the already decomposing carcass and buried Bura. He had carried a wooden stake the whole way on his shoulder. Now he pounded it into Bura's grave. It was even more like a pillar than a stake. He ordered his grandson to write on it with an indelible pencil: "*Here lies Bura, who lost his life in a battle with a train.*" But these words were soon washed away by the rains.

Twice a day trains pass by this place. People, riding in warm compartments on comfortable couches, take no notice of the weather-beaten pillar on a hill. If they do happen to notice it they just assume it's land-surveyors' marker. They have no inkling of whose sweat irrigated this comfortable railroad. And they don't know that not one camel has remained in the aul of Kazakbai. But maybe people remember black Bura after all? The locomotive whistles out a greeting every time it passes by. The doleful whistle is drowned out by the hurried tales the wheels tell of the solitary Bura. But it is not a funeral lament for Bura sunk into an eternal dream of golden sands...

The train races, rushes, flies along...

What force can restrain it? There is none!



My story started with the war, not childhood.
Once, stepping warily along a forest path,
I realized we had to be compassionate
To every little thing, to every blade of grass.

Alice*

This happened in the autumn of nineteen forty-four in Estonia. The nazis, who were on the retreat in the Ukraine and Byelorussia, made a stand in the Baltic area, clutching desperately at every bit of land.

As a field nurse of a regiment of self-propelled guns, I travelled with the crews. The medical car had got stuck far behind somewhere, I had no communication with it, and my stock of bandages was dwindling with alarming rapidity—there are always many wounded

* English translation © Raduga Publishers 1986

during an offensive.

And then one day an old woman approached me at a farmstead we had just taken. She was lovingly holding a madly cackling dirty-white hen in her hands.

She knew no Russian, but she made herself clear enough: her hen had a broken leg—obviously the result of the bombardment.

I did not think the old woman was making an unreasonable request asking me to help the fowl. I don't belong to the category of people who think that feeling pain is the privilege of humans. But what would my comrades say?

I tried to explain to the old woman that I was short of bandages, but she just kept pushing the hen into my hands.

There had formed a circle of curious soldiers around us. Suddenly I heard the reproving voice of a middle-aged soldier:

"That's a living creature in pain! Have you no heart?"

Another, younger man supported him: "All those city folk are alike. No understanding."

Then came a veritable chorus of condemnation. The things they said about my heartlessness! I don't like thinking of it even now.

True, one joker suggested that the "wounded" chicken would make a very nice broth, but they turned on him so fiercely he shut his mouth in a hurry and just blinked.

I opened my bag. Somebody planed two chips of wood for me, and I applied splints to the hen's leg in full accordance with the precepts of the medical science.

I was thus given an object lesson of kindness by front-line soldiers who, it would seem, should have been purged of all "sentimentality" by the war.

That lesson was to be remembered by me always, and I remember it now, as I am writing about Alice. I remember that unimaginably distant war autumn and myself, an awkward girl with a Red Cross bag over my shoulder and a cackling hen in my hands.

BEFRIEND ME!

If you want to have a friend,
befriend me.

Saint-Exupéry

One day my fifteen-year-old daughter told me about a dog who had been "trying to sell itself".

Alyona had met that odd creature at what is known as the Bird Market in Moscow, which she visited every Sunday. They sell not only birds but all kinds of pets there—fish, guinea-pigs, dogs and cats.

My daughter's emotional account was so vivid I could almost see the scene.

The dogsellers were lined along a tall stone fence. Unnerved by the unusual atmosphere and a presentiment of betrayal, the dogs barked at every passer-by. Actually, the owners surreptitiously urged them on, the way the Gipsies, we are told, used to tease the horses to make them look frisky. After all, people mostly bought dogs to guard their houses, so the more

vicious the dog the more likely the deal.

A terribly skinny and unkempt Alsatian was sitting by the fence silently, all alone, watching enviously every dog who left with a new master. Its mournful eyes and shyly wagging tail, its entire tense pose seemed to say, nay, to cry: "Please, take me too, please! "

But no one was interested in a bit of goods that had no price on it. A dog that was selling itself, or rather giving itself away, was something strange and even suspicious. To be sure it looked like an Alsatian, but one could just imagine its pedigree!

For three Sundays running Alyona saw that dog at the market, always in the same place. Each time its eyes looked more hopeless, and its bones stuck out more noticeably underneath its skin.

After hearing this story, we decided to adopt that dog irrespective of its pedigree—even if it was a mongrel of pure blood.

So the next Sunday found us threading our way through a throng of people and animals. There was an undescribable babel of voices, barks and twittering. I was dazed.

Suddenly, among the dogs tugging at their leashes I saw, squatting on the snow, a strange animal, which looked scared out of its wits. It was the size of a cat, its coat was sand-coloured, it had huge bright-yellow eyes, a taut body, a luxuriously fluffy tail and thin legs, the hind ones knock-kneed in the shape of the letter "X".

There was a home-made collar on the animal's neck. Attached to it was a chain held by a frightened-looking

boy, who had probably been kicked out of the house with firm orders to get rid of the unwanted pet.

I squatted beside the animal and stroked it cautiously. It flattened its ears.

"Careful, it bites! " the boy cried. But I was already holding the animal in my arms. Its heart was beating wildly, and its entire body was shuddering convulsively. Small wonder! Imagine such enervating surroundings for a wild animal!

Actually I did not think of it as a "wild animal"—it was too miserable and frightened. Besides, I thought it was a cub. Only later we discovered that it was a young but fully-grown steppe fox, a corsac.

The Encyclopedia says about them: "The corsac looks like an ordinary fox, but it is smaller (length of body—50-60 cm, tail—25-35 cm). It lives in deserts and semi-deserts of Asia and South-Eastern Europe. In the Soviet Union it is to be found from Northern Caucasus to Transbaikalia, and as far north as 50° N. Corsacs are useful in exterminating rodents."

In gratitude for this useful function mankind has been ruthlessly exterminating these corsacs, since, as the Encyclopedia explained, they "yield excellent pelts".

Well, here I was holding my very own corsac, while the frightened boy was pocketing a tenner.

Not that I was unaware of the complications that awaited me. And I do not mean just the organizational difficulties that invariably arise and multiply when you bring a creature from the wild world into your own, civilized one, unless you intend to keep it imprisoned, that is confined to a cage. Nor do I only mean that

poignant feeling of personal responsibility, dogging you day and night.

The worst thing is that our relationships with our "smaller brothers", as Yesenin put it, almost always end tragically. The wild world takes vengeance on those who violate its laws.

I meant to ask the boy what he called the animal, where it came from and what he fed it, but just then Alyona descended on me like a whirlwind accompanied by the very dog for whose sake we had come to the market and which, strangely enough, really was an Alsatian. He had a meek, forlorn look. Now that he had finally found a "buyer", he followed my daughter as if he were glued to her heels. On the spot we named him Docile, Dossy for short, and the fox we named Alice.

In the meantime Alice's former owner had vanished.

So we never found out how she came to be in Moscow. One fancied she had come on her long slender legs from some unknown lands, from the half-forgotten tales of childhood.

I walked through the throng, clasping the trembling Alice, and everybody stared at us, while some pest of a little girl ran after me asking again and again: "Why did you buy it, madam? For a fur collar?"

Alyona pushed a chicken leg under the sideboard: though we did not yet know Alice's tastes, we were sure she was not a vegetarian.

Soon we heard the crunching of bones. My daughter peered under the sideboard—the crunching changed to

cough-like sounds. We became frightened that Alice had choked on a bone, but soon we learnt that a cough is a corsac's way of expressing anger of medium intensity.

She demonstrated another way of voicing her resentment when Pussy came into the room—ruffled up and puzzled. The smell of a wild animal had set her on edge.

Alice rushed out from under the sideboard and started yapping in a high puppy's voice. This, we learnt, expressed the superlative degree of anger.

Pussy retaliated by arching her back like a camel. I picked her up and carried out of the room, wrathful and spitting furiously.

Alice gave the same kind of reception to Dossy when he was brought in for a formal introduction. On the way from the market they were both so worked up that they took no notice of each other. But here, in the house, having been given complete freedom of movement and having investigated its geography, Alice felt it was her territory. The inoffensive Dossy stared wonderingly at the small cheeky creature yapping frenziedly at him. He could have knocked her off her feet with one paw. So the introduction was not a success. The dog had to be taken away too.

(Forestalling events a little, I must say that, in our not very spacious Moscow apartment I never succeeded in achieving peaceful coexistence between the fox, the cat and the dog. Temporarily, we had to give Pussy away to one friend, and Dossy to another.)

Having frustrated the designs of her enemies, the "conqueror" began sniffing at the furniture, at every

chair, every table-leg. Then she jumped on an armchair that stood by the window, propped herself on the sill and stared out with great interest into the snow-bound Moscow courtyard. She repeated this manoeuvre innumerable times in the days that followed. Beyond the window was freedom.

I poured some meat soup into a ceramic ash-tray and offered it to Alice. She sniffed at it and then expressed her disdain unequivocally by squatting over it and sending a jet straight into the bowl. We were shocked. Some table manners!

Later I found out that foxes had this way of marking their stores. But then, they first buried them in the ground. Here Alice did quite well without any earth to cover up her food. It was an instinct with her.

On the other hand, I suspect that she also did it out of her amazing sense of humour. She often repeated this "chamber-pot" trick, but only when she did not like the food.

When night fell, Alice became quite lively. She dashed about the room like a squirrel, jumping on chairs and down on the floor. Of course, foxes are nocturnal animals. Not being nocturnal animals ourselves, we decided to lock her up for the night in the bathroom. But this was easier said than done.

All that day, going in or coming out of the dining-room, we closed the door behind us with panicky speed, afraid that the nimble fox would slip out into the hall and then to the other room. We thought it was quite enough to have one room reeking of the zoo.

But Alice was bent upon spreading to the entire territory of the flat and attempted this again and again

with truly foxy cunning, persistence and resourcefulness.

However, when she saw that the door leading out of the dining-room was open, she simply refused to go out.

I tied a piece of meat to a string and, playing with Alice as with a kitten, tried to lure her out into the hall. Alice did run out into the hall, but as soon as somebody tried to shut the door of the dining-room she easily beat him to it and again became uncatchable. Gay and highly pleased, her slanting "fashionable" eyes sparkling mischievously and her mouth open in a grin, she was obviously making fun of us.

So we "had fun" with Alice until two in the morning. The complex contraption, the result of collective engineering effort, which consisted of a rope, one end of which was in Alyona's hand and the other tied to the door-handle, did not help either. Alice still managed to slip in before Alyona had time to pull the door shut.

But at last the trap worked. Possibly Alice had simply got tired of the game. At any rate she was installed in the bathroom.

Excited by the adventure, I could not fall asleep and took a sleeping pill.

I was just dozing off when there came a terrific crash.

I jumped up and ran into the bathroom. What I saw was both unexpected and disconcerting. Standing on her hind legs in the wash-bowl, Alice was sweeping everything off the glass shelf with her forepaws—a glass with tooth-brushes, a box of tooth-powder, soap,

shampoo, eau de Cologne, jars of cream. All this was dropping into the wash-bowl or on the floor, breaking to bits, pouring into puddles or scattering over the floor.

Unhurriedly, the fox turned her face towards me. Her muzzle was smeared with tooth-powder. Her mouth was again open in a wide grin.

I cleaned up the mess, removed from the bathroom everything that could be moved, took two more pills and fell asleep happy in the knowledge that there was not an object left in the bathroom with which Alice could make any kind of noise.

Alas, both my happiness and my sleep were short-lived. I had underestimated a fox's ingenuity.

A strange scraping noise awakened me. I rose groggily, cursing the fox, and discovered her sliding down the bath very much like children slide down an ice-hill. This particular "child" was using its claws (probably to brake the descent) and hence the scraping noise that awakened me.

It was clear that Alice could go on with this till morning—when *her* night-time came. Or she would invent some other amusement.

What was I to do? My husband, Alexei, suggested a not very humane but the only possible way of taming this particular shrew—to chain her up for the night.

Because I did not want to lose Alice's trust, I palmed off the role of jailer onto my husband. Before long he was holding in his hands, protected by sinister-looking black leather gloves, a squirming, biting and scratching little devil. But Alice soon stopped fighting. Talking tenderly to her, I attached a long chain to the

collar and tied the other end to the pipe beyond the lavatory pan. It was not very elegant, but what could we do?

Alexei cautiously let the fox down. Alice jumped—and found the chain holding her. Then she started running in circles round the thing to which she was chained. The chain coiled round the pan once, twice, three times... And presently Alice was rearing, almost hanging, half-strangulated, her eyes popping out.

Of course we had to take her down from "the "gibbet" at once.

Well, what *were* we to do? The next morning I was to see an editor, there was to be a none-too-easy discussion and a lot of work to do. I needed a clear head, but what chance was there that I'd have it? No hope for sleep, and three sleeping pills inside me to make me groggy.

"You know what," Alexei suggested. "I'll take Alice into the bedroom with me, and you bed down on the sofa in the study. If you plug up your ears with cotton-wool, you may perhaps sleep off your pills yet. And I sleep like a log, you know, so even Alice won't bother me."

"Thanks," I said. "There doesn't seem to be any other way." And I made to unhook the chain from Alice's collar.

"No, don't do that! " Alexei stopped me. "After all, Alice is not a rabbit, she's a real predatory beast. I don't like the idea of being at her mercy while asleep. I might wake up minus a nose. Let's chain her to the radiator—she can't possibly hang herself from that."

Well, no sooner said than done. Alice was installed

in the bedroom and chained to the radiator. No chance to play any noisy games. Near her was only a saucer with water.

But the spirit of the captive had not been broken. To begin with, she smashed the saucer with a blow of her paw. Then, standing on her hind legs and stretching the chain as far as it went, she managed to catch hold of my cardigan which, I imagined, was well out of her reach on the back of the bed. She started clawing and tearing it, and in a few minutes my favourite cardigan was reduced to shreds.

But that was only the beginning. Alice found another splendid opportunity of revenging herself on us. With her long sharp claws she began to peel off the wallpaper from the entire expanse of the wall that was within her reach. Soon the wall was bare.

She quietened down for a moment, pondering on her further plan of action. Then she started gnawing her chain furiously. It seemed a hopeless undertaking, but we were amazed at her indomitable spirit. And it was painful to listen to the gnashing of teeth on iron.

I went into the study, plugged my ears with cotton-wool, and lay down, but I could still hear the grinding noise. And sleep fled me. It was past three in the morning.

Suddenly all became quiet. "Thank God," I thought. "She has resigned herself to her fate." And at last I fell asleep.

In the morning, contrary to all expectations, I awoke in blissful silence. I rushed into the bedroom, but the door was locked on the inside. Why? I knocked.

"Just a moment," I heard Alexei's strangely sound-

ing voice. "But be careful. Don't let Alice out."

"How can I let her out? Radiator and all?"

"Well, the point is she's ... broken free."

"What d'you mean 'broken free'?" I asked, slipping into the bedroom and slamming the door shut at once.

"Very simply: she gnawed through the chain."

"Well, that's what I call nice, sharp teeth! "

"What followed was a real circus. She dashed about the room like one possessed, jumped from one bed to the other, and ran all over me."

"And what then?"

"I watched the circus for a while, and then my eyes began to close and I fell asleep. Just covered my nose with a hand in case she had any designs on it."

"And where's she now?"

"Under the bed. Asleep. She's very tired..."

Two days after Alice came to live with us I noticed that she was unwell. She scorned her mattress (too hot!) and lay on her side on cool tiles, groaning softly. Her breathing was feverish and her nose dry and hot.

I took her to the vet. At once she became the centre of attention. Even the splendid marble-coloured Great Dane lost all its admirers.

But Alice was indifferent to her spectacular success. She was feeling very bad indeed. We were allowed to jump the queue, and as soon as a tear-stained old woman came out of the surgery carrying her alcoholic cat who had nearly choked on a cork from a flask with Valerian drops, I went in with Alice in my arms.

The first thing they did to the trembling patient was

to raise her tail without any ceremony and push a thermometer into her rectum. Her temperature was 44.5°C, which is a lot even for animals, whose body temperature is higher than people's.

Then the vet sounded Alice thoroughly and announced that she had membraneous pneumonia.

Alice must have caught cold at the market, sitting for a long time on the snow without movement and swallowing the frosty air with a mouth open wide in her agitation.

"She's very ill," said the vet. "She needs penicillin injections. But an injection may send a wild animal into shock. Let's try giving her pills. What's her name?"

"Alice."

"And family name?"

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Your family name?" the vet said impatiently.

I gave my name, and the vet wrote out a prescription. On the way home I dropped at a chemist's and, unfolding the prescription saw: "*For Alice Drunina, a vixen.*"

The next problem was how to make Alice Drunina swallow the bitter pills. Trying to outsmart a fox three times a day was quite a task!

I made a cut in a piece of raw liver and stuffed in a pill. It worked the first time—Alice swallowed the liver and medicine together. But after swallowing it she looked puzzled and displeased: "What was that nasty stuff inside?"

The second time Alice ate the liver, but left the pill be.

The third time she refused to eat altogether.

Again she was lying on her side, groaning softly, her once fluffy tail held between the legs.

I put my finger into warm milk and pushed it into Alice's mouth by force. Later, when she recovered, I gave her my index finger, she took it carefully into her mouth, held it a minute, then gently let go.

It was clear that no force on earth could make Alice swallow pills, and without medicine she was sure to die. Again I took her to the vet.

"Well," he said, "there's nothing for it. Let's risk an injection."

The nurse pulled out Alice's hind leg, the doctor took a syringe with a thick needle... I held my breath: would there be shock? After all, Alice was a wild animal. But all passed well.

She began to improve. However, she had to have three injections a day, and I simply had not the time to take her all the way to the vet three times a day. And then my husband, who had never held a syringe in his hand, took a heroic decision: he said he would himself give Alice the injections.

There I sat, holding the wary and suspicious Alice in my lap. Alexei filled the syringe, gently pulled back the X-shaped hind leg, smeared it with iodine and pushed in the needle resolutely. Alice shuddered and tried to see who had "bitten" her treacherously from behind. But the piston did not yield to pressure. The as yet inept medic scowled and pulled it out. Again he set the leg in position. And at that moment I discovered that my right hand was in Alice's mouth! Alexei made another jab. I shut my eyes, remembering the chain Alice had gnawed through. Why shouldn't she

take a snap at her tormentors? How could she know that we were hurting her for her own good?

But some instinct must have told her exactly that. Or perhaps she had infinite trust in me. At any rate she just clenched her teeth slightly when Alexei injected the medicine.

Now she began to get better by leaps and bounds. There were many signs of recovery, but the most convincing one was that she was back at her devilry. The first piece of mischief reassured us completely.

It happened like this. I was talking long-distance on the phone and suddenly realized I was talking into a void. No voice, not even a rustle. What was the matter? The phone seemed alright, the plug was in the socket. We started checking the wiring inch by inch and finally came upon the break—the wire had been snapped across by sharp teeth.

It took Alice a couple of weeks to become transformed from a miserable little beast shivering from fear and cold at the Bird Market into the idol of our household, worshipped by our entire family.

We vied with one another to win her affection, and I was inordinately proud to be her obvious favourite.

I was the only person she allowed to pick her up, but even then, the first few seconds she trembled and flattened her ears, as the instinct of a wild animal fought with her feeling of attachment to a human being.

I was the only one who dared offer Alice food from my hand—she always took the titbits very gently and I

had no fear for my fingers.

Once Alexei decided he would try to hand-feed Alice too, and offered her a piece of liver. She deigned to accept the offering, placed it on the floor and followed with a lightning-like lunge, symbolic, it is true, but very explicit—don't you try bribing me, take care of your fingers. After that she started eating the liver with dignity.

As for my daughter, Alice virtually terrorized her, going for her legs and aiming for a bite. Armed with a besom, Alyona moved about the flat in huge, funny leaps, often yelling to me for help.

What had Alyona done to displease Alice and earn her dislike? Who can tell? Perhaps some girl had been cruel to her, and Alyona looked like her—tall, and shaggy-headed.

Or perhaps Alice simply resented Alyona's loud voice and jerky movements? Who can tell?

I myself had learnt to move as a wraith. My friends joked that since Alice had come to live with us I no longer walked but glided, no longer gesticulated but made passes with my hands, no longer talked but cooed...

Some of them asked me why I had chosen to keep a wild and not a domestic animal. After all, it caused me no end of trouble!

I just shrugged in reply. Why? Because it filled my life with gladness. It gave me joy to see ever more threads of understanding and trust stretch between us, as my love won over a disobedient, distrustful creature.

I was happy in the knowledge that when I came

home, the mere sound of the banging lift-door would make Alice twitch her ears, give a thin cricket-like squeak and rush to the door like a dog. To be sure, when I did enter, she pretended that she had wandered into the hall on her own business and not to fawn on me. She was a proud animal, that little vixen!

But that was what I treasured most in her, this pride, this restrain, this sense of independence. It made every sign of attachment all the more precious.

What joy welled up in me when the wild thing suddenly leaped into my lap as I sat hunched on the sofa of an evening, tired and displeased with myself, harrassed by the unending stream of our human concerns.

As for mischief—do mothers love their children less for getting into mischief, even if they sometimes drive them to distraction?

Generally there was much of the monkey in Alice's character. She just could not resist the urge to wreak havoc—tear up, break, gnaw things. Therefore in our absence and at night she was confined to her "personal quarters"—the bathroom and the hall. But she never accepted this arrangement and time and again scratched and gnawed holes under the doors of the rooms. One morning we were horrified to discover half of the parquet in the hall dismantled, board by board.

When we were at home, Alice was invited in, or broke in if not specially invited. The trouble was that she invariably sought out the least accessible corner of the room and made herself a "home" there, with all it entailed.

Occasionally Alice allowed me the unheard-of

liberty of pulling her from under the sideboard by her gorgeous tail. She coughed threateningly, snarled and snapped at me, but she never actually bit me for this outrage.

But what were we to do if she wriggled her way inside the sofa and made herself a burrow among the springs? In the beginning we resorted to the help of Uncle Vacuum Cleaner, as we reverently titled our saviour. At the first notes of his whining voice Alice would dart out from inside the sofa, her eyes popping, race into the bathroom and lie down on her mattress. But after a while she got used to the vacuum cleaner, lost her fear of it and even started coughing fiercely at it. Once she even tried to bite it.

What distressed us most of all was the pungent stench of a zoo which pervaded the flat and even the staircase. There was no getting rid of the stench—it was quite incredibly resistant to all deodorants.

In those days I spent most of my time crawling about on my knees with a rag in my hand. The freshly scrubbed spot I drenched with a mouth-wash which I bought in staggering quantities from our local chemist's.

A friend of mine brought me a priceless gift from India—sticks of sandalwood. We called it "antifoxin". Whenever we expected guests, I would burn one or two of those aromatic sticks. As they smouldered, a very pleasant heady smoke drifted through the rooms, filling them with a smell of mysterious India, temples ... and Alice. No "antifoxin" was a hundred per cent Alice-proof.

A cloud appeared on our horizon, growing darker

and more ominous with every day—it looked as though we would have to get rid of Alice. One by one the members of our family came round to this sad decision. I opposed it the longest, but finally gave in, after I overheard a comment in the underground: "Stinks like a goat, she does, this fine lady with painted eyes." These words said by some poisonous crone signed Alice's verdict.

But where could we find a nice home for out stinking beauty? Of course, a wild creature could not be fully happy, wrenched away from her native habitat, but still...

Some well-meaning but ignorant people advised us to set her free in the vicinity of Moscow.

That would have meant certain death for an animal spoilt by a good life with people and unable to feed itself in a natural environment.

Some of our friends assured us that she would adapt herself to the rough conditions of freedom in a matter of a few days. Perhaps she would, unless our omnipresent hunters made a trophy of her before those few days were out.

To place her in a zoo? The zoo had no need of this very ordinary animal. Now if Alice were a cheetah, or a dragon from Kommodo Island...

I did not even want to contemplate a pets' corner in a kindergarten or some other children's institution. In a large body of children (and not only children) there were bound to be, beside those who were really kind and genuinely fond of animals, some stupid or even cruel characters. And one such "exception to the rule" was quite enough to make a helpless animal's

life a misery. Especially if this animal was wild and proud. To be sure, a rabbit or a guinea-pig felt quite comfortable in a cage.

But what were we to do?

"Why should not she become a film star?" my husband suddenly pronounced. "There is an animal film studio at Petushki, a hundred kilometres from Moscow, called the Animal Pool of the Central Studio of Popular Science Films. The animals are well cared for there. And there's always a chance of becoming a film star."

Of all the suggestions made so far, this seemed the most acceptable. And, like any besotted mother, I was convinced that my fluffy-tailed daughter had great talent.

The move was fixed for the following Sunday. Our own nervousness that day was communicated to Alice. Suddenly she refused to be picked up. I could do nothing. Driven into her corner in the bathroom, Alice maintained an all-round defence, and her sharp teeth snapped whenever I attempted to approach her. In the end I had to get Alexei to don his black gloves and help me to overpower the fox. The whole incident made my heart bleed. But when she finally resigned herself and lay still in the zipped bag that had been chosen for her transportation, I felt even more depressed. What I was committing, I felt, was an act of betrayal.

The train-trip passed without mishap. I had bought Alice a dog ticket, and so she was travelling quite legally. I showed her ticket, feeling very righteous, to the ticket-collector, a good-natured old man, who punched it and then asked what breed the doggie was. Without batting an eyelid I said "steppe terrier". The ticket-col-

lector blinked and said respectfully that it must be a very rare breed since he had never heard of it. Yes, I confirmed, it *was* a very rare breed. I did not dare admit that Alice was a fox, because I was not sure what the regulations were concerning wild animals—perhaps I was supposed to have it in a cage?

Petushki was snowbound and very quiet. There did not seem to be anybody about at the Animal Pool. The damp air breathed a vague promise of the far-off spring. The manager of the animal studio was obviously disappointed in Alice's looks. He needed a mate for a handsome and big red male, for February is foxes' mating season. And there, instead of a big and strong vixen, we had brought him an unprepossessing runt of a fox.

Nevertheless he was nice to us and to Alice, and introduced us to his assistant, a gaunt middle-aged woman wearing heavy soldiers' top-boots.

"Time to put your little pets to bed," he told her.

"Who are the pets?" we asked.

"This woman is an adopted mother of a lovely family. She has brought up three wolves. The 'pets' adore her, but regard all other humans with a wolf's normal animosity. So she is the only person who can persuade them to go into their night quarters."

It was getting dark, there was little time left till the train, so we postponed our proper acquaintance with Petushki Pool till next Sunday.

As a rule, time in Moscow flies with cosmic speed. But those seven days dragged interminably.

I was worried about Alice: would she be able to live in an open-air cage? Might not she catch pneumonia again?

The manager had assured me that she was quite safe. After all, she was not going to sit in one place, as she had at the market. She would get acclimatized soon, he said.

At last the week was over. Our meeting with Alice was a sad one. No, there was nothing wrong with her health. But the sight of her wrung my heart.

In the first place, I had never seen her in a cage—and God forbid to see a friend behind bars.

It is held that steppe foxes do not yield to training. This opinion was formed, I imagine, by people who only came in contact with them at a specially scheduled hour and in a special place—on the arena, in a cage, etc.

But with us Alice was a member of the family, she had contact with humans every minute of her life, seeing us and hearing our voices and steps all the time. She was loved and taken care of, and with every day she was becoming more tame, more trustful.

But here, in Petushki, she had been put in a solitary cell, that is a cage, and some unfamiliar two-legged creatures only appeared to toss her a piece of horseflesh or to clean the cage.

In that week Alice had lost nearly everything she had acquired in that month with us.

Do you remember H. G. Wells's *The Island of Doctor Moreau?* It is a fantastic story about a vivisectionist, who by complicated operations changed animals into something like human beings. But when they were left uncontrolled, they gradually lost all their human features and reversed to barking, tearing food with their teeth and running about on all fours.

I remembered that odd and sad story as I looked at

Alice, downcast, aloof, a wild creature.

It is true that when she saw us she livened up, jumped and even uttered her famous "cricket squeak" of joyful amazement. But that was all the demonstration of feeling we got out of her.

I entered her cage. It was big enough for a large animal—some three metres by four. At first Alice refused to accept a titbit from my hand, then she began taking the food, but sprang back at once. My Alice was afraid of me! Picking her up was out of the question!

From my conversation with the manager I gathered that they had no prospect of roles for her. Again the same question loomed before us—what were we to do with her? Surely we could not allow her to retreat into the twilight of wilderness! She was so lonely! Depriving her of freedom in her native steppe, people had offered her only an iron cage instead.

The other inmates of the Petushki Pool seemed to be quite happy. Even the wolves, proverbially hankering for their native forest. Three huge beasts jumped around the gaunt middle-aged woman like so many dogs, trying to lick her face and nuzzling her hand in which she clutched the treat she had brought them—dry brown rusks. Imagine wolves behaving like that!

We returned home in utter dejection, wondering hopelessly what to do about Alice. And then one of our friends came up with a good idea.

"There is a corsac in Durov's menagerie—a male. Ask them if they want a female—to make a pair. She won't be lonely any more, and you won't have to worry about her. And you will also have a brood of charming grandchildren."

Well, I had no objection to becoming a foxy grannie. Perhaps, Alice would have a better career on the stage than on the screen—Durov's menagerie is really a famous animal theatre.

Besides, Durov Street, where the menagerie is situated is quite near our house and visiting Alice would not take a whole day, not like travelling to Petushki.

But would they accept our bride? Would not they think her unworthy, an uneducated steppe fox of doubtful lineage?

Alexei was sent as a matchmaker. He came back saying they were quite willing to accept Alice. Hurrah! Perhaps our poor fox would finally find a permanent and happy home!

On our first free day we went to Petushki. They were willing to let us have Alice back, but the mere getting hold of her proved to be extremely difficult. In these last days she had reverted to the wild state completely, and it took us quite a time to catch this creature, maddened with fear and obviously determined to sell her life dearly. Even when Alexei finally held her in his arms, Alice went on squirming, scratching and biting. Alexei had to use all his strength to hold her and a couple of times barely managed to jerk his face back from her sharp teeth.

Could it be that Alice had forgotten us completely? Wouldn't she remember anything?

It was some twenty minutes' walk to the station. During that time Alice quietened down enough to allow us to put her into that same shopping bag in which she had arrived in Petushki.

The train-journey lulled her to sleep. Her stomach

was swollen and hard to the touch, and she started and flattened her ears whenever I felt it. She was obviously in pain. There were also other signs that things were not right with her digestion. I was terribly embarrassed, blushing furiously, while Alexei looked on with a twinkle in his eyes. Our fellow-passangers behaved each according to his or her view of proprieties: some sat with stony faces, others joked at the expense of our badly-behaved "child", still others expressed sympathy.

All the doors in our flat were flung open. Alice was free to run wherever she wanted. But alas! she did not take this chance and was lying on her side in the bathroom again, like the time she had pneumonia, her tail between her legs, and groaning weakly. Could her recent frenzy, I wondered, have been caused by this pain.

In the morning I travelled with her along the familiar route to the vet. The "bride" was in no condition to meet her betrothed!

They gave her an enema, petted her, and asked me all about her. And, strangely, as I told the vet and the nurse that we were going to place her in Durov's menagerie, I became aware of my listeners' lack of enthusiasm. Suddenly, I felt a bit like a Judas.

At Durov's menagerie, Alice was to spend two or three days in an isolation ward, that is in a separate cage.

They showed me the "bridegroom". He was magnificent. Almost twice the size of Alice, with a luxurious tail.

But his quarters were nothing to write home about—just a small cage. It is true, however, that inside the cage there was a little house with a removable roof and a partition. The fox first entered the "anteroom" and then the "bedroom", where he felt quite safe. Wild foxes always build themselves "two-room" burrows.

Of course, after Petushki, the premises of the menagerie seemed awfully cramped. Film stars lived on a much grander scale than theatre actors, it seemed. That was quite understandable. The animals' theatre, located in a very busy part of town, had only a small building, housing monkeys and other tropical animals, and a little courtyard adjoining it.

No, Alice was not going to wallow in luxury. But after all, love is supposed to make up for a lot of inconveniences.

When I came to visit Alice five days later (a bout of 'flu prevented me from coming earlier) I was dismayed to find Alice still on her own, in a separate cage. She looked thin and listless. A bowl of soup stood untouched and was not even overturned—she had lost her taste for mischief.

But why had not they put her with her intended? February, the month of foxes' marriages, was already drawing to a close...

I was told that they had changed their minds about placing Alice with the male because "the very fact of her presence would nullify all his training".

I like that! Why then take her away from Petushki? Just for the shift from a large cage into a small one?

I returned to Alice's cage in complete bewilderment. She was not there—they had taken her for a session

of training.

I waited until they brought her back in a special portable cage and asked the young trainer if Alice were already tame enough to be picked up.

"What for?" the young woman said indifferently. "I have no intention of ever picking her up."

From our subsequent conversation I realized that there was a world of difference between the concepts of a "tame" and a "trained" animal. I had imagined that a tame fox could remain untrained, but it had never occurred to me that a trained fox need not necessarily be tame.

It appeared she need not. What they were trying to develop in her were mechanical responses based on specific conditioned reflexes: pull the string and you get a piece of meat as a reward.

But Alice cared nothing for the theory of conditioned reflexes. I did not believe that a person she did not love and did not trust could ever make her perform. And the most important expression of her trust was permission to pick her up in one's arms.

It appeared the entire training of the four-legged performers was based on bribes. But Alice's dominant, and, to my view, most attractive feature was incorruptibility.

Clearly enough, Alice was not meant for the stage.

They might prevail on her to perform a trick, but she would not feel any less lonely and unhappy because of it. These people were not seeking to establish emotional contact with the animal. Perhaps it was not necessary for their purpose--the success of their performing animals seemed to justify their methods.

I came home heavy-hearted. Again we were where we had started.

To make matters worse, my 'flu developed into pneumonia, and I was ill for a whole month.

Naturally, as soon as I was up and about, I went to Durov's menagerie.

Excitement mounted in me as the pungent odour of a zoo assailed my nostrils. I was slightly light-headed, either from weakness or from the smells of spring.

For a long time I wandered among the cages over the sloshy melting snow, but Alice did not seem to be there.

"Come along, I'll show you your fox! " the young trainer called out to me.

In appearance, Alice had not changed much. She was a little thinner and she had moulted, but otherwise... The tale about Dr. Moreau's sad experiment was drawing to a close. The animal I saw in the cage was sullen and dispirited. It was simply a steppe fox living in captivity, and nothing else. Not a trace of Personality was left, of Alice that was unlike anybody else. All ties between her and me had been severed. I didn't think she even recognized me.

However, here I proved wrong. When I pushed my index finger through the netting, not really hoping to achieve anything, Alice, momentarily recalling something, took it gently between her teeth and held it a moment.

But immediately afterwards she retired to her house and did not show herself again. I pictured her lying in the "bedroom", her ears flattened, thinking something like, "You too, Brutus! "

The episode with the finger proved too much for my weakened nerves. To my great shame, I burst into tears before the young trainer, who was quite dismayed at this display of emotions. I tried to take myself in hand, but the memory of Alice's caress and of her subsequent hasty retreat into her little house seared me again and again. Tears just poured down my face, and my handkerchief did not seem to be anywhere, blast it!

What Alexei eventually found by Alice's cage was a swollen-eye and unutterably miserable woman. We had agreed to meet here. At first he was alarmed—had something happened?—and then, understanding everything, he came up with a beautiful solution: summer was near, why not keep her out in the country till autumn? By then things might work out. "Here, take my handkerchief," he commanded, "and dry your eyes, please! "

IF YOU BEFRIEND A WILD CREATURE, YOU ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR IT

You are responsible to the end for all those you have befriended.

Saint-Exupéry

I am writing this story about a little fox at a time when military conflicts and class battles are exploding on our planet.

A fragile little steppe fox seen against this formid-

able global background... Is it worth while writing about such a small matter?

Man must always remain human. He must cherish in himself grateful love for Nature, appreciation of its beauty and the chivalrous desire to protect the weak.

And when Man forgets about his human essence, he pays dearly for it.

The attitude to our "smaller brothers", creatures wholly dependent on us, is a touchstone of a person's worth. I do not mean that every animal-lover is a good person. Former inmates of nazi death camps well remember that their guards, who set their Alsatians on them, were often sincerely fond of those Alsatians and their other dogs and cats.

It is true. Not every animal-lover is a good person. But I am firmly convinced that anybody who is cruel to animals is a bad person.

We rented a house in the country from a certain Granny Masha and moved in with our entire menagerie—Alice, Dossy and Pussy. Alice was installed in a dog-kennel—quite a luxurious apartment—with spacious grounds surrounded by netting.

Three days after we had moved in I was amazed to see Dossy having a thrilling game with Alice in her pen. The fox pulled at the dog's ears, snapped at his legs, ran round him in circles and even jumped on his back like a trick-rider.

I must say that Dossy was the most good-natured and easygoing creature I had ever met in my life. He tried to make friends with everybody at our country

home, even with hedgehogs who paid us nocturnal visits from the wood. True, these overtures of his invariably ended in a bloodied nose and crushed hopes, but he never quite despaired that the next prickly snorting ball would see his beautiful soul.

The first attempt of this incorrigible optimist to make friends with Pussy nearly cost him his eyes.

After that their relations followed a strict pattern. When they met head on, Pussy did the "camel trick" and yowled disgustingly, while Dossy pretended he did not see her and went on his way, with dignity written all over his face, keeping it, however, averted and his eyes half-closed, to be on the safe side. Nor was the precaution superfluous. When she was in a bad mood, Pussy went straight for the face of the hapless dog. But even on such occasions Dossy just tossed his head to shake the ill-tempered creature off and never did any harm to her. He had a chivalrous heart and was not prepared to fight members of the fair sex.

Pussy made an immediate conquest of the hearts of all the tomcats in the village. Granny Masha's house was besieged by suitors of all shades. Some dangled on the trees like exotic fruits. Others, like statues, decorated the fence. The third, a more enterprising category, squeezed into the space under the floor and staged nightly concerts there.

Once Alyona, with the help of a home-made lasso caught one of the more importunate of Pussy's admirers and almost succeeded in pulling him out through the hatch in the kitchen floor. Unfortunately, the noose had got round not Tom's leg, as had been planned, but his neck. His eyes popping, the wooer

choked and wheezed and the girl could not even let him go, since, running away with a rope round his neck he could catch at something and get strangled. Patiently and carefully, inch by inch, Alyona pulled in the line with the resisting cat at the other end, like an angler landing a big fish.

Back in Moscow, Pussy had a litter of lovely fluffy kittens. There were plenty of takers, thank God, and the kittens went like hot cakes. But Pussy, for some reason, decided that the kittens had been snatched by Dossy and that was when she made her first attempt to scratch his eyes out.

And yet Dossy's tender heart yearned friendship. And now fate had again brought him and Alice together.

But how had the dog got into the pen? Could he have cleared a two-metre-high fence?

Well, I'd wait and see how he got out.

It was done very simply—he climbed the fence like a cat, catching at the netting with his claws. Not that it was a very graceful sight, but at least I saw with my own eyes the proverbial "dog on a fence".

Now Dossy could pay visits to his girlfriend any time of day or night. Their meetings usually followed the same pattern. At the sight of Dossy Alice began dashing about the pen, unable to contain her feelings. This went on until Dossy flopped down on the ground in Alice's own domain and immediately started a chase after the fox inspired by the ambitious dream of catching her by the tail. The pursuer and the pursued reached a great pitch of excitement. Sometimes Alice changed course so abruptly that Dossy had no time

to brake and crashed into the fence at full speed.

Alice was indefatigable in games, while Dossy soon became winded and his tongue lolled out of his mouth. He then stretched on the floor of the pen and fell asleep. Alice tried to shake him awake, and then, seeing the futility of her attempts, sprawled on his back as on a mattress and fell asleep too.

Sometimes Pussy came, attracted by the noise of the scuffle. She would perch on one of the pen's four posts and loom there like a sentry on a tower, her big yellow eyes fixed on the "combatants". She was obviously on Alice's side and would become terribly upset when she imagined that the fox was going to end up in the jaws of the bloodthirsty dog. In those moments she arched her back to the utmost, her fur stood on end and she yowled on the highest note, obviously preparing to swoop down on Dossy. On many an occasion I barely managed to snatch her off her perch in time.

Alice and Dossy ate from the same bowl. She, being the mistress of the "house", was always offered the first choice. Dossy would stand aside politely, licking his chops and waiting patiently till his girlfriend had had enough. But the girlfriend was greedy, and the thought that she would never manage to eat it all made her frantic. She hurried, choked, swallowed large chunks without chewing and finally, feeling that she had no room for any more food, she'd snatch a large piece of meat out of the bowl and start dashing about holding it in her teeth. Never mind the friendship, she seemed to say, one has to take care of Number One.

She would eventually bury her treasure, then get into a panic, dig it out and start dashing about again.

Dossy watched her capers imperturbably, and later, as imperturbably, dug out and ate up her stores.

One day I was cleaning the pen. Alice kept playfully snapping at my jacket and slacks. Dossy hung about outside. Suddenly I noticed that he became quite still and fixed a strange gaze on somewhere behind my back. I followed his look and was momentarily petrified. I had forgotten to bolt the door on the inside! Alice, of course, had discovered my oversight and was already outside. Before I could decide what to do, Dossy made a terrific leap towards Alice, she dashed off and a mad chase began. Fearing that the dog would chase Alice into a neighbour's garden, I yelled, "Back, Dossy! " and ran out of the pen. After all, it was child's play for Alice to find a hole in the fence. And there might be normal dogs on the other side, not friendly creatures like our Dossy, who would tear the fox to bits. Anyway, how was I to lure Alice back into the pen? What prevented her from making a bee-line for the woods that began right behind Granny Masha's fence?

Luckily, the obedient Dossy stopped the chase at once and ran up to me, gasping and slavering. I seized the excited dog by the collar and dragged him to his kennel to tie him up. Then I sprinted back to the place of catastrophe, first shouting to my family through an open window: "Alice has escaped! "

What were we going to do? To think that such a terrible thing should happen when everything had been so satisfactorily arranged.

I glanced hopelessly at the pen and did not believe my eyes. Alice was curled up on the roof of her house, with a wary look in her huge squinting eyes.

After that episode I decided that I would let Alice out of the pen now and again. I was convinced that she would always come back home.

My husband was dead set against it. All right, she did come back once, but it was nothing short of a miracle. And who could guarantee that the miracle would be repeated?

Of course there could be no guarantee. Intuition plus an understanding of Alice's character—that was all the guarantee I could offer.

I opened the door of the pen. Do you think Alice made a dash for freedom? No, she regarded it as a provocation and decided to ignore it.

But it is hard to withstand the call of freedom, especially after you have had a taste of it. Alice began to waver. She stepped outside the door, then jumped back. And at last...

I have never seen a more entrancing spectacle than Alice's first introduction to freedom. She did not walk, nor did she run. She kept bounding up, like a fountain. Probably she did it because of the tall grass which made her wary of some lurking danger, but it looked like a quaint, charming and inimitable dance. The trajectory of Alice's movements was reminiscent of the erratic flight of a fly or the fluttering of a butterfly. It was, indeed, a dance glorifying freedom and spring.

In the meantime spring was already giving way to summer. The sun was hot, the air buzzed and rang, the wind carried the sweet smell of honey and the bitter smell of wormwood.

Alice kept close to me—after all it was all so new and frightening. At the least noise—the crackling of a dry branch, a voice coming from the street, she dashed for the safety of her pen.

After one such panicky flight, I closed the door of the pen. The first walk lasted no more than ten minutes.

The next day Alice was far more assured. She no longer clung to me, *I* had to keep my eye on her. And she made fewer dashes inside the pen—she was becoming acclimatized to freedom. This time I allowed our "captive" some twenty minutes of freedom.

On the third day I let her out early in the morning, without giving her any breakfast; I had decided never to feed her before a walk. She was more likely to come back if she was hungry, especially if I put some strong-smelling titbit on the roof of her house.

By then Alice had taken to freedom as a fish to water. She ran after butterflies, futilely stalked magpies who obviously enjoyed teasing her, made unexpected "attacks" on me from ambush, but mostly amused herself by tormenting Dossy.

I had to put him on a chain when Alice was set free, fearing that he might chase her into the neighbouring garden or into the wood. To make the humiliation of captivity easier on Dossy, we stretched a wire between two aspens and he could run along the length of it, clanging his chain like a convict. That chain had re-

placed a leather leash, also on account of Alice.

You see, she had invented a wonderful game. Aware of Dossy's helplessness, she would make a mad rush straight at him. The dog would squeal and shift from foot to foot in anticipation of the happy moment when he would grab the fox by the scruff of her neck. There, Alice was within his reach, it seemed. He leapt forward, the leash stretched to breaking point—and at the moment the wily fox, who could calculate distances with mathematical precision, swerved sharply, her tail flicking a bare millimetre from the dog's nose, and the next moment was sitting on her haunches at a safe distance, grinning hugely at her tricked playmate, her mouth stretched from ear to ear, her tongue out, her eyes full of laughter. And Dossy, thrown back by the leash, would be looking round in stupid puzzlement. Two minutes later the performance was given an encore. Of course there was not a leash in the world that could stand such overloads. So we had to replace it with a chain.

Very often the antics of the impish fox were watched morosely by two disapproving figures—Granny Masha and Pussy. The former would compress her lips and mutter something like "daft critter", while the other, as usual, did the "camel trick" and yowled.

One day Alice decided to break the ice in her relations with the cat. She trotted towards Pussy with the most amiable expression on her face. The nearer she came the steeper was the arch of the cat's back, the more piercing its yowls. But Alice was not to be deterred. She was within three metres of the cat ... two ... one. The yowling now sounded like an air-raid siren.

At the last moment I grabbed Pussy without waiting to see the outcome of the encounter.

In the beginning, while running free about the yard and garden Alice would take care to keep me in sight—just in case. And the moment I entered her pen and placed a titbit on the roof of her house, she would be inside, eager for a treat.

But after a month Alice began to feel cramped in our garden and made sorties to the right and left of it, sometimes disappearing for all of two or three hours. The neighbours reported seeing her. I became particularly alarmed when the neighbour from the left said that Alice had been playing with his puppy. It was all very touching, of course, but supposing she took it into her head to have a game with the huge black Great Dane that belonged to our right-side neighbour?

Once Alice was away an unusually long time and came back looking very strange—both pleased and guilty. She did not touch her food in the bowl, slipped into her house and ignored all our blandishments.

A quarter of an hour later the all-knowing Granny Masha arrived and launched into a wrathful monologue:

"D'you know what this critter of yours has gone and done! She's killed all the chickens in V's (a writer) coop. Choked every one of them, the pest, and laid them out side by side. Imagine the loss! Is that the way to carry on, I ask you? It just ain't proper! "

"But how d'you know it was Alice's doing, Granny Masha?"

"Who else? And they saw her at it! No, you won't get out of it! "

I realized I wouldn't. Actually, I did not blame Alice

all that much. A writer has no business to mess about with chickens. But I very much feared that Alice's crusade against small private ownership would end badly.

So it did. The day came when Alice did not return from one of her jaunts. All our worst fears had come true.

The long summer day was over, it was almost dark, but she was not back yet. All of us wandered disconsolately round the pen.

Alice did not come back in the morning either. We were in despair.

At noon Granny Masha came into our half of the house, as usual without knocking, and said gruffly:

"The Petrovs said come and take your fox away."

Alyona and I dashed out in our housecoats. The Petrovs lived nearby, in the fourth house in the row.

This was what Mrs. Petrov told us:

"I was on the verandah when I heard an explosion of terrific barking. I looked out and saw a pack of dogs bursting into our shed. There were three or four, I don't know for sure. I grabbed a pail of water and hurried over. There was a snarling writhing heap in the corner. I shouted and dashed the water at the heap. They ran away. As I turned to go, I saw some animal looking at me from the corner. It was quite dark there and I could not make out what the animal was. I dashed out of the shed and called to my husband. He ran over, had a good look at the animal and said with a laugh: 'Why, it has a collar on. It must be our neighbours' fox.' "

We went into the shed. It took a lot of wheedling to

get Alice out of her hiding-place. When she did come out, she did not let me pick her up—she must have had a really bad fright. When my eyes got used to the darkness I saw her left ear had a tear in it...

Another neighbour told us she had seen the dogs pursuing Alice down the street and had heard the fox "crying like a child".

From the contributions of other eye-witnesses we were able to piece together this story of misplaced trust. It began with our incorrigible minx setting out, once again, in search of adventure. She had a gay romp with the neighbour's puppy and, very pleased with herself, decided to venture farther afield.

She made her way from one yard to another, finding something to amuse herself with everywhere. And suddenly—what luck! —she saw three animals who were certainly kin of our Dossy and the neighbour's puppy, although they did not look quite like them.

So Alice trotted over to the three dogs cheerily, not even daunted, the silly creature, by their growls, as she had not been daunted by Pussy's yowls. She was so used to kindness she simply could not imagine that anybody could hurt her. But the three dogs possessed normal canine instincts. Their noses told them that a wild animal was approaching, but, stunned by its temerity, they did not rush into action at once. In the meantime Alice came quite near and wagged her tail, inviting them to join in a game. Suddenly a small shaggy dog attacked her, aiming for her throat. Alice just managed to dodge her, but felt a searing pain in her ear. The two other dogs came to life and rushed at her, barking. Before Alice could collect her wits, her

legs made for the gate. She ran, gripped by terror, understanding nothing. What had she done? What for? Death was on her heals in the shape of three frenzied dogs.

Alice ran home, her strength ebbing. At last she reached our house—but the wicket was closed. There was no time to look for a hole in the fence. The dogs had almost caught up with her. It was then that Alice squealed like a child—calling for help, perhaps...

Naturally, after that incident we stopped letting her out of her pen. Deprived of freedom, she became even faster friends with Dossy. They were inseparable, and we were happy that she had such a devoted friend. But once I heard a plaintive puppy-like squealing. Who was it complaining?

I discovered it was Alice, abandoned by Dossy at the height of their game. She was trying to scramble up the netting after her departing playmate, but kept falling, scrambling up again, and falling again...

More and more often I heard the plaintive squeals. Having learnt to get over Alice's netting, Dossy used the newly acquired skill to get over the fence surrounding our garden. There was no keeping him at home, with all the willing lady-dogs roaming the village, followed by their admirers. Thunderous polyphonic barking burst out ever so often as yet another dogfight flared up.

Sometime Dossy was absent for three days at a run, and he came back looking scrawny, miserable and covered with bites.

On his return Dossy usually crawled on his belly from the fence to the kennel. For several days he

would stay all the way, licking his wounds, both bodily and spiritual. Then he would be off again.

Alice became limp and glum, quite unlike her former cheerful self.

Then one day, upon the completion of yet another doggy affair, Dossy reappeared in Alice's pen. We expected her to go wild with joy, but she cut him cold. In vain were his attempts to start a jolly chase. Alice gave him an indifferent stare, yawned widely, turned and trotted into her house.

Early morning. I am bringing Alice a bowl of food.

As soon as she sees me, Alice begins to dash back and forth about the pen—she is hungry and eager for her breakfast. When I enter the pen, she jumps round me like a sportive dog and tugs at the skirts of my dress in her impatience.

Then I set about cleaning the pen, and Alice does her merry best to get in the way—snapping at the rake, jumping at my feet as a fox does when hunting mice.

If the weather is good, I bring inside the pen a light collapsible table, its legs bearing the marks of Alice's teeth, and a collapsible chair, similarly marked, and sit down to work.

I am eager to use every hour, every minute for contact with Alice, for getting closer to her.

I like working in the pen. Strangely, its walls of netting seem to protect me from the daily fuss and worry.

The fox demands attention and makes fierce attacks now on the table-legs, now on my own, but this does not distract me in the least. I play with her absent-mind-

edly, my inner concentration intact. And all the time I feel happy that there is a creature in the world whom it is within my power to protect from all ills.

(That was what I believed then. As though it is possible to protect anybody from that implacable mixture of law and chance that we used to call fate!)

Sometimes I took Alice for a walk in the wood. I had to carry her in my arms, like a baby, for she never learnt to walk on a leash. Alice adored those walks. She was as inquisitive as a monkey, and the wood was chockful of interesting things.

Once we went for our walk as usual. It was a serene and slightly sad noon of Indian summer. The summer holiday-makers had all left, and the wood rested from their blaring transistors. I walked along a cutting that was as straight as an arrow. The birch-trunks were translucent, the sun was bright, the silence deafening. Suddenly I heard a woman's scream. I looked round and saw a white shaggy dog, the size of a calf, galloping silently after us along the cutting. It was Pirate, a fierce dog of the South-Russian sheepdog breed.

Not only the local boys gave a wide berth to the garden guarded by Pirate, but even grown-ups, who had no designs on other people's apples, walked warily along the fence behind which dashed that huge fleecy beast with his yellow fangs bared ferociously.

And now this monster was making straight for us. A stout lady in high-heeled shoes was running after it, quite a way behind, shouting and waving a leash. The dog ignored her, maintaining his sinister silence.

The distance between us was dwindling catastrophically. There was no point in running—it was much

more dangerous in fact than staying put and trying to divert Pirate with conversation until his mistress arrived with the leash. And the main thing was not to show your fear.

But there was still enough time for Alice to make her getaway. I was not going to make a present of her to Pirate. I had to set her free at once—even if I were never to see her again...

I lowered Alice to the ground. She slipped into the bushes—and you could go whistling for her!

The dog either did not notice her flight or decided that I was a more worthwhile quarry: he continued to run towards me, silently, without barking. That was the most terrifying thing about his attack.

I pressed my back to a thick birch-tree. No more than two metres now divided me from the dog. "Pirate, doggie," I cooed in a disgustingly sweet, ingratiating tone, "please don't bite me..."

The dog stopped in his tracks. Encouraged by his puzzlement, I went on in a steadier voice: "You're such a handsome, clever, kind dog..."

At that moment I saw Pirate tense up for a jump: he aimed at my throat. The first leap was not high enough. I don't know how I managed to dodge the second.

I awaited a third attack with terror, watching the progress of Pirate's frantic mistress all the time from the corner of my eye. Fear had given her a spurt of energy, but she could not possibly make it. Anyway, would the ineffectual lady be able to control her fierce dog?

Suddenly Pirate, who had squatted in preparation

for a third leap, broke into a howl. I could not believe my eyes—my small brave fox had sunk her teeth into his hind leg...

Pirate made a lightning-fast lunge, but his fangs snapped on air. Alice was already racing away, her fluffy tail held high. When she did that her length was reduced by half, and so it was twice as hard to get hold of her. Pirate forgot all about me and dashed in hot pursuit.

I breathed a sigh of relief and made a bee-line for home. I had no doubt that Alice would get away from the big dog, but would she come home?

When I ran up to the pen I saw Alice lying calmly on the roof of her house. Only her heaving sides betrayed the effort she had expended. Otherwise her entire aspect—the lazy sprawling pose, the half-closed eyes—seemed to say: "What are you on about? I merely acted as any self-respecting fox would. In our steppes and deserts we don't abandon our friends in trouble".

October had come, rains were drumming on the roof. Alyona had long ago gone back to Moscow and school, but Alexei and I were still here, unable to decide what to do with Alice. One thing was clear to us—it was impossible to keep her in a city apartment. Finally life itself solved our dilemma.

At the end of October we had to leave on business, and with sinking hearts entrusted our animals to the mercies of our landlady—Granny Masha.

The old woman detested Alice, unable to understand how could anyone bother about a "useless" animal.

When I came back three weeks later I found Alice's house empty. I rushed to Granny Masha. She greeted me with a joyful monologue: "She ran away, that fox. Two days after you left. I came out with the bowl in the morning, the way you told me and thought she'd jump out and start coughing at me. That's what she gave me by way of thanks! But she did not jump out, and I saw the door was open a chink. I must've forgotten to bolt it the night before, and that fox is a crafty beast... Now, what're you crying for? It's a good thing she ran off and set you free. The trouble you had with her! "

More than twenty days had gone since Alice's escape. I was sure that if she had not met with disadventure she'd have come back more than once. But there was nobody but Granny Masha in the house...

Most probably, the first day of freedom was also Alice's last day. Neither dogs nor hunters were likely to spare her, too trusting for the world into which she had suddenly been plunged. Anyway, she had no notion how to procure food...

Without much hope, I left a piece of meat on the roof of her house. It was still there in the morning.

The next morning it was gone, but there were distinct tracks of a cat in the mud beside the fox house.

We went back to town.

Just in case, I begged Granny Masha to leave pieces of food for Alice on the roof of her house. But if the old woman did fulfil my request, it could only have benefited some stray cat abandoned by the summer residents.

I accepted the first offer of a business trip and upon returning I did not leave town all winter. It was only in March that I went to visit Granny Masha.

It was a radiant spring day. My memories had lost some of their poignancy. All memories are erased by Time in the end... Only I took care never to come near the pen.

That night I dreamed of Alice. I was awakened by her voice, that cricket-like chirring that expressed her joyful surprise.

I switched on the light, read a while, then fell asleep again. And in the morning I saw a string of tracks running across the snow to the window where my bed stood. My heart missed a beat. The five-fingered tracks looked remarkably like Alice's.

Was the little fox alive? Had some vague recollections brought her to Granny Masha's house exactly at the time I was spending the night there?

But perhaps some other animal had left the tracks? After all, the wood was next door. Actually, I preferred this version. It was awful to imagine a creature doomed to eternal loneliness wandering near by, a creature nobody wanted but me and forever lost to me, a creature I was "responsible for to the end" because I had befriended it and had not been able to protect it.

Alice... She came from no one knows where and went no one knows where. And I shall never know who left those tracks in the soggy snow on that night in March...

Bzou*

...And then he neighed—and
there was such anguish, such
fury in this wail that the
stars rocked in the heaven.

From a folk legend

Upon awakening, Bzou pricked up his ears. He listened for footsteps on the other side of the wall, for his master's voice. He had long grown accustomed to them and waited with a sweet impatience. Each morning, as soon as the ray of sunlight, like the golden tail of a bull, had penetrated through the chink in the stable wall, Barkun Badra would enter with a pail. His hand grasped the bolt, and Bzou knew it was his master. And if he heard a faint crackling, like chunks

* English translation © Raduga Publishers 1986

of ice crunching beneath his hooves, it meant of course that he had not come with an empty pail... Ah, what water this was—pure as glass, and cold, from a deep, deep well. People drank this water, and Bzou had never tasted any other. Even on long journeys, when they forded roaring, murky streams, exhausted from the journey and the heat, his master would not let Bzou have a drink of that impure water. But then, as soon as they passed through the gates into the yard, he would climb down from the sweaty saddle and lead the horse to the well. Bzou was so accustomed to the spring water that he could smell its cold purity from far away.

He especially thirsted for it in the morning. The night hours flowed by above him, and he dozed, or chewed unhurriedly, sinking his nostrils into hay or corn meal—his trough was always full—and by morning his throat was dry and he wanted badly to drink. But then his master would come and open the gate, the pail handle would clank, and Bzou would whinny gratefully, softly, and rub his muzzle against his master's shoulder. But Badra was never demonstrative. Only rarely would he reach over and pat him on the withers. He would grab the pitchfork, and set about cleaning the stall. He had no time for displays of affection. And Bzou wondered whether it was kindness or sullen cruelty which reigned in his master's heart. He would not let him go hungry, but then he would work him hard, not allowing him to rest and on occasion lashing out with the whip so cruelly that everything clouded before Bzou's eyes.

But if the ringing of an iron chain resounded in the yard together with the sound of footsteps, Bzou knew

they were bringing him corn on a flat wooden dish. And here he had to eat with care and not get up to any mischief, or he might break the plate. Once he had accidentally stepped on the dish with his hoof. His master had not forgiven him this slip: he had yelled and whammed his fist into his belly with such force that Bzou had barely remained on his feet!

Now his master would walk up to the doors and place a dish with corn on the ground. Bzou would hear the rattling of keys. The master would unhurriedly pull out the whole bunch, select a flat one, and inspect the lock to make sure no one had been prowling around during the night. He would not hurry to unlock it: he did everything deliberately. But then maybe seeing Bzou, waiting for him, was small happiness? What was the love of a man? Just try to figure it out! A man is a man: he lives by reason. And this was not given Bzou to know. It was easier to wait for morning to come than to wait for his master to open the lock. Bzou's sharp ears stood erect, and he pulled on the bridle... Why did his master need such a lock, like a wooden yoke on the neck of a buffalo—you needed two hands to hold it! His master was a respected person, and wise: everybody in the village asked his advice, so how could he fail to understand that Bzou would not allow anyone else to come near him! Hadn't he proved his devotion two years ago at the races?

He would not have allowed that bowlegged Kharun mount him, if it hadn't been for the bridle and the strong hands to which he always so lovingly submitted! Bzou looked into his arrogant eyes, and a cold chill overcame him. He immediately recognized bad-

ness in the lame man. Even his soul was crippled. People trust in their intellect, which often lets them down. But instinct does not deceive—it's a gift from God. Horses and dogs are more perspicacious than people.

Kharun had stolen up to Bzou as if to a woman, his head drawn into his shoulders and his glance frozen. He hugged Bzou around the neck and began murmuring in his ear as tenderly as he was able, as if he had embraced a loved one! But the horse had twitched its satin coat and rolled a malicious agate eye. His master had shouted at him hoarsely and tugged on the bridle: "Easy!" Ah, this bridle, how much torment it had caused Bzou! And two others crept up slowly, warily behind Kharun. And they began talking rapidly, interrupting one another, to his master, and Kharun even pressed his hand to his chest. What was left to do? They say if you ask nicely, you'll be given both horse and saddle. His master handed the bridle to Kharun. Bzou snorted in bewilderment and contempt; he spun around, kicking, and Kharun just couldn't get his foot into the stirrup. And when he finally scrambled up and began fidgeting in the saddle, Bzou felt that the rider was totally incompetent: he was used to the way his master jumped easily into the saddle and pressed his legs tightly against his flanks. His master was easy to carry, even though he was heavy. But this one felt as if they had hoisted a sack onto the back of a cart-horse, and he even pounded his flanks with his heels. Bzou had never experienced such humiliation!

He was quite familiar with this circular track with

a strip at the start and headed towards the other horses prancing in expectation of the "Go! " signal.

If Bzou had understood human speech, he would have been astonished: how similar humans were until they mount a horse. To listen to them you'd think they were the smartest creatures in the world! Each has a word of wisdom to say:

"A good horse does not obey just anyone."

"You have to know their ways, that's the first thing. One horse needs a lash, but another... If you mount Bzou, throw the lash away! "

"Kharun has only known jades who need the spurs..."

"He shouldn't have let him take Bzou! "

"A good horse needs a good hand."

But it was only after the races were over that these wise words were said.

Now he waited impatiently for the signal, stamping his hoof, arching his neck. And the riders could barely restrain the other horses. How much patience these humans had! What were they waiting for! But Kharun still can't get settled in the saddle, his legs are spread wide... While there was still time, his master should walk over and drive the bungler away. Only his master knew how to treat Bzou. Bzou would do everything himself, if only the human would not hinder him. And this one might very well topple off him. When Bzou ran, all his thoughts were concentrated ahead. His eyes, and each vein...

The shot rang out, and the ground trembled beneath the hooves. The horses were enveloped in a haze of dust. One of the riders' hoods was torn off by the wind, another dropped his lash in his haste... The rows

of shiny new bullet pouches on their Circassian coats were covered by dust in a second's time. Forward! No time to worry about hoods and bullet pouches—forward! The hot breath of the other racers assailed Bzou's nostrils, like steam from boiling water. He passed one, then another ... now he was overtaking a third! The earth consisted of this circular field, rushing by beneath his hooves, and the whistling of others' breathing which poured over him for an instant, and the distant shouts of people, and the sky in the distance... And all this was happiness! But the rider! Could his eyes have deceived him? There was no malice in this human and his touch could not be felt. At this point his master would have pulled on the bridle, cutting hard into his lips. And instead of the clear sky rocking ahead there would be cruppers covered with grey dust... That's the way it always was! Bzou would shake his head, but the bridle would restrain him like a vise. And thus he would round the track once, then again, and only on the third round would his master begin to slacken the reins. But this one immediately let go the reins. And he was lighter, too. There was only one problem—he sat unsteadily in the saddle. He would slide up onto the withers, and Bzou would lift up his head, afraid that he would go flying over his head, or he would slip down onto his crupper, and Bzou would slow his pace and kick out. But all those horses, which had passed him in the beginning, were now forced to look at his tail. Their hoarse breathing was no longer audible, and the clatter of their hooves thundered behind him, and the wind whistled more and more freely. It had been long since Bzou had known such freedom,

such power in his legs, and no bit tearing at his froth-covered lips.

"Come on, Bzou, come on! "

"Press on, Kharun! "

The young boys shouted and whistled. Several men jumped up from their seats and waved their hoods. Only his master, Barkun Badra, cried out as Bzou sped by:

"Don't let him go... The reins, pull the reins!! Don't let him go, Kharun! ..

But his voice was lost in the grey dust, in the thunder of the hooves.

Now something strange began happening to Bzou. The taut wind still roared and sang in his ears. Panting, his mouth open, his nostrils flared, Bzou caught this wind, but his devastated lungs could no longer get their fill of air! He inhaled deep with a terrible effort. But this desperate inhalation was shallow and convulsive. And now Bzou heard the clatter of hooves growing louder behind him, heard the hoarse breathing once again—a racer's muzzle appeared beside him, and then his back with the hunched rider... They were passing him right and left! Horses' tails flashed before his eyes. This had never happened to proud Bzou, not once since they had first led him out to the circular field. His heart was about to burst, his flanks heaved and sweat stung his eyes. But Bzou could not give in. Rage, like the blow of a whip, carried him forward. Clouds of earth flew up from the hooves ahead and struck the eyes, the world was blanketed in a tremulous haze. Once again he had the sensation of flight! Once again he experienced the miracle of a swift, pas-

sionate flight. Bzou tumbled into it as one tumbles into a precipice. One more round. To the howls, shouts, frenzy of the people. Why were they jumping up and down and waving their arms? Only one last lap—and victory! And then he could leave this piece of earth, pounded to dust by hooves, and people, shouting wildly, would come tearing across the field towards him... But the chestnut racer was still ahead of him. Bzou knew he would overtake him, rage had given him strength. He would come in first or collapse with a burst heart!

The chestnut's wet flank was almost even with him. Hot salty smell emanated from it. His breath struck Bzou's neck and burned along his crupper... Bzou saw the clear sky through the hot haze of sweat and tears. He was first, and the unbounded heaven came sweeping towards him! The blow of the whip sliced into his chest, and Bzou almost tripped. Kharun, fidgeting in his saddle, had begun to lash at his chest—as though the blows of his heels had not been enough... Bzou faltered. The chestnut flashed by like a bullet.

Badra shouted desperately from the crowd:

"Don't beat him! The Devil take you, don't beat him! " He shut up his eyes so as not to see the disgrace. "May lightning strike me! How could I have entrusted my horse ... to such an ass?"

But Kharun, crouching over the horse's mane, stretched out his hand towards its frothy muzzle, wanting to encourage the shaken Bzou with a caress. Then he once again stung him with the whip. Bzou shook his head and tore the reins from the rider's hands. Kharun cried out and grabbed onto his mane.

One by one the racers passed Bzou. Yes, everything was finished. And Bzou turned to the crowd which parted before him. The remaining horses galloped by. Bzou ran to the centre of the field, the reins flapping; Kharun lurched in the saddle like a drunk...

Badra ran up and took the reins. He had never seen Bzou in such a rage: his eyes were bloodshot, he was trembling all over, and he wouldn't even let his master come near him. Suddenly he raised his head high and, peering round at the horses still tearing round the field, pierced the air with a loud neigh. Here, on this circular field, was his life. He had left the track as if leaving life. Now he was of no importance and his neighing did not move anyone. Only a few had something to say about him:

"Kharun's entirely to blame. A roe deer broke one of his legs, but it should've broken both... I don't know how he managed to stay in the saddle."

"You should never bite off more than you can chew."

But one old man, standing a distance away said:

"Kharun is not overly blessed with brains. He's spent his whole life chasing after the wind..." And gripping his staff, he plunged it down into the earth. The old man was a water-carrier. You could always see him driving the lazy buffalos, and the water would be splashing around in barrels behind him. He carried water to the corn fields and the tea plantations at the hottest time of day. No one had ever seen him on horseback, and there had never been a good horse in his yard. But the old man had never missed a race.

A year had passed since that sad autumn, and Badra

once again led Bzou to the circular track. And once again, before he had even led the horse to the starting line, lame Kharun came darting out from the crowd and headed towards him, lashing his shiny boots with a whip. He grabbed hold of the bridle and talked for a long time to Bzou's master. And once again he pressed his hand to his chest... Bzou champed down on the bit so hard that his teeth gnashed. His master remained in the saddle. He jumped down when Bzou had arrived first at the finish, pressed his cheek against his muzzle and handed the reins to the young boys to walk the overheated horse. And a certain Shakhan shouted then, doffing his cap and bowing his head before Bzou, as before an altar:

"You never see such a sinewy and strapping roe deer, much less a horse! Such a horse is worth a whole fortune! "

Shakhan was known in the village for his custom of accompanying the horse-herds when they were driven to the mountain pastures. He would ride along as far as the foothills and return—not once had he ascended further.

The old water-carrier laughed at Shakhan's words:

"You measure everything in rubles! You probably look at the sky and estimate how much it costs. Eh, Shakhan, you're a blockhead. Bzou is a Narty racer—whoever gave him his name hit the mark exactly! "

"Big deal... The only thing he's good for is winning prizes! What are you trying to tell me! " Shakhan waved him aside. But he looked greedily at the horse and clicked his tongue in agitation. Only what did Shakhan know of Bzou? Why had Bzou been born into

the world, why did he need these long legs and a heart which would burst apart if he were overtaken in a race? After each race Bzou felt as if every bone in his body had been broken. And didn't people see his wet flanks and the spasmodic trembling which left him barely able to stand on his feet? But he lived when he ran, he lived in order to run. This was a life beneath the shadow of eternal fear: not to be second! What need had he of people, their rejoicing, delighted shouts and words, their boasting, of fame and prizes? What use did he have for all this? People were the ones who needed prizes...

...With what impatience he waited for his master each morning, and how long his master fiddled with the accursed lock! Didn't he know that the touch of another's hand, not only lame Kharun's, would set him trembling, as if it wasn't a hand at all but a burning spark searing his flesh. And why, oh why did he hang up this lock? Maybe he was afraid that someone would lead Bzou out of the yard in the middle of the night? Kharun would hobble over with a saddle over his shoulders, open the gates, and farewell, Bzou.

But even though this lock was the source of much joking by the neighbors, Badra was adamant:

"A good horse is like a pretty girl," he would say. "Everyone covets it. That's what the lock's for. There was a time when I didn't use it, and what happened to Bzou's father? They stole him and sold him to the Svans! No Svans ever came around here. So someone from these parts stole him. It's easy to make jokes,

but what I went through then! I found my horse, but it was no easy matter getting him back. The Svan didn't know the man who had sold him the stolen horse. And I didn't either. After buying a Kabardian racer for next to nothing, that Svan had no intention to just give him up. And I pleaded and complained and offered money... I finally won out, after paying double the price. And when he died in his old age, I buried my poor Arap like a person. That's what blood flows in Bzou's veins! But to tell the truth, I'm not so much afraid that he'll be stolen, but spoiled. Lame Kharun taught me a lesson I'll never forget. It's a true saying: give no one your horse or your gun. I can lie down on Bzou's back and sleep peacefully, because I know my horse. But just let someone else try it! And when they came galloping into the mountains with news of my father's illness... Even if I had a hundred lives, if it weren't for Bzou I think not one would be left."

He had told everyone this story.

Bzou had just been saddle-broken and Badra had driven a large collective farm herd into the mountains—in the village of Apsara there was always a lot of livestock. And so he had taken Bzou along with him. Fresh air, succulent grass—by autumn he would have built up his strength. But it never came to that. A messenger had galloped up: "Come along, Badra! " Badra guessed that this was no trifling matter if they had sent a man such a distance. He had a hard time catching Bzou, who was grazing on a slope. Roaming free, he had quickly grown unaccustomed to the bridle. The elder shepherd tried to dissuade Badra, telling him to wait until morning because night was setting in. Badra

did not listen, and brought over the saddle. His friends also tried to talk him out of going.

"The horse is still not fully saddle-broken, and you know yourself what the mountains are like at night. At least stop off for the night somewhere—even at our first resting place."

But Badra did not heed them.

The high mountains, the sharp, pure air had done their work in the past week. Bzou's legs had become light, his heart raced. He struggled to free himself from their hands. The bridle infuriated him. When they first put it on he had torn his lips on the bit. He trembled every time he thought of it... The lasso, the rope—he had broken everything! Three men held him with difficulty, they rubbed their hands raw against the bridle straps. Even now the clanking of the bridle made him shiver and prick his ears, as if wolves' fangs were gnashing nearby. And that was probably how it had been with Arap... If they only wouldn't pull so hard on the reins when he felt the urge to run! And going downhill this bridle didn't let him breathe at all, while his heart pounded and his legs flew by themselves, and pebbles came spraying up from beneath his hooves. Even his harness with its shiny silver ornaments would slip down and urge him on. Even the saddle, straining down towards his withers, called him: forward, forward! Were this bridle and saddle really necessary? Bzou still didn't know then how much he would owe to Barkun Badra, that a racer could only profit from saddle and harness. Nor did he know that from this night on another life would begin for him, and love for him would awaken in his master's heart.

If Badra, leaving the pasture that night, had relied only on himself and the advice of his friends, he would not have seen Apsara the next morning. It was inconceivable that the two-day journey from the Shoudyd Mountain to the sea could be made in such a short time.

Night found them on the steep rocky slope of Pardgial. As always in the mountains, darkness fell instantly: a moment ago there had been the sun and the high clear sky, and suddenly it was as if they had entered a cave. Soon dark clouds gathered above the gorge, and it grew even colder. Badra had barely descended the steep slope, found the path and realized that it was not far to the bottom of the gorge when a thunderstorm burst out. Badra pulled up the skirts of his Circassian coat, let go the reins, and clutched at the pommel of the saddle. The wind tore at the ends of his rain-soaked hood and hurled them into his face. Peals of thunder rolled along the gorge and Bzou answered the heavy rocky echo with a terrified neighing. But then he grew strangely subdued and submissive and carefully picked his way along the slippery path. How they managed to stay on that path, how they made their way out, Badra did not know. Maybe it was because he had dropped the reins and put his faith in the horse?..

Just before dawn the sky cleared up and the road was easier to follow. Bzou wore down his shoes on the rocks, but there was no need to worry: the road was already descending into the valley.

For a whole week precipices and abysses spun before Bzou's eyes and he was overcome by trembling at the memory of the thunderstorm. And he also re-

membered—for all time—his master's unusual display of affection: that day Badra had kissed him on his lips. His master had never shown such tenderness.

Could human memory be so short?

Bzou had long been waiting for his master. The stable was full of golden smoke—the sun was pouring through the chinks, and a sparrow, after pecking around in his trough and chirping, flitted up to the cross-beam beneath the roof and perched there contentedly, its eyelids drooping. Every morning at dawn it would fly in through a chink under the eaves. It would hop around right underfoot... If master led Bzou out today with only his halter, where would he be taking him? It would be better of course if he took off the halter as well and let him loose in the cornfield. When Bzou was still a foal he had grazed there with his mother. Any minute now his master would open the gates and walk in, and the damp freshness of the earth, the autumn field, would waft into the stable. Out there was freedom, space to move! .. "Bzou, Bzou! " his master would cry softly, and then he would take the hoe and begin cleaning the stall, rake up the hay, take the remains of the corn stalks from the trough. And Bzou, picking out the last tasty corn kernels, would rub his muzzle against his master's back and nuzzle up to him as if he were his mother. His master liked this. Then Badra would lead him towards the door, and Bzou would whinny softly and joyfully, and begin to

prance, arching his neck and looking out over his master's shoulder at the open expanse. Behind the gate lay a large empty field; there he could run to his heart's content! No matter if his master shouted and lashed at him with his whip—Bzou would endure anything. Each year, before leaving for the mountain pastures, the herds would be driven here. And always, whether winter or summer, Bzou would meet an old grey gelding on the vacant plot. His belly sagged, his bones protruded sharply. Bzou would greet him with a clear neighing. The gelding would raise his head and stare dully and heavily—he never responded. He wore neither bridle nor rope, and he was not hobbled—that's who lived a free life! But the gelding probably knew nothing of freedom, he just stared and lowered his head once again... Where was he from, what was he—this gelding? What did Bzou understand then? Life was like a tender blade of spring grass. Like the high heavens, like a light breeze ruffling his mane...

His master would lead him to the tethering post in the corner of the yard. Deer horns jutted out from a wooden post: this had been Badra's idea—and he tossed the reins onto one of the branches. He pulled a knife with a shiny blade from his belt... Bzou rolled his eyes, seized by a vague alarm.

"Easy, Bzou, easy! " his master repeated over and over. "Steady! "

Quickly and nimbly he cut off coarse hair over Bzou's hooves. It was completely painless. But why did his master do this? But then he probably knew best. And Bzou stood without stirring. Let him! Even let him strike Bzou with his thin, piercing lash, let him

drive him into the icy water to bathe, which Bzou hated more than anything else on earth! Just as long as he kept lame Kharun away from him. There he was, hobbling past the gate. He stopped and was watching, boring through him with his screwed-up eyes... His master also noticed the lame man. And not a word. He turned his back to him.

Before every trip Badra would thoroughly examine his hooves, feel each leg. He would brush his coat with a currycomb until the skin underneath was burning. He would throw off his work clothes, which smelled so familiar to Bzou, and would come striding out in shiny black boots and a long Circassian coat with its bright rows of bullet pouches sewn across the chest.

"Where do you think you're going all decked out, Badra?" his master's friends would ask jokingly. "Listen, how are you going to reach the stirrups—climb up on a wood block?"

Barkun Badra was rather short, wiry and dark-complexioned. But he wasn't all that small—it was only next to his strapping horse that he appeared that way.

Badra responded with good-natured laughter: he could take a joke if it was not ill-intended. He bundled up his felt cloak so tightly that it could fit in the stirrup. And the cloak was the only burden that was ever strapped to the saddle. Whose soul would not rejoice, just looking at the silk riding hood, the silk shirt and the Circassian coat, which fitted Badra like the sheath fits the dagger, at the whip, pulled up to the handle, at the prancing horse held in check by taut reins. True, there were some who just laughed at

Barkun: not a *jigit**, they would say, but a bride! But Badra loved to show off, it was in his blood.

The men from the village remembered a certain night trip. Both, those who were with Badra then, and those who only knew of the story through hearsay, of course could not but have exaggerated, made things up, or they might have detracted from it out of envy, but the talk of Barkun's flaunts spread. As if they had never sent him before after a bride in another village! But for some reason they remembered this particular trip. They had said:

"When they set their eyes on the horse, there'll be glory for the men of Apsara." "What's in a horse! " others had retorted. "Other men climb into the saddle as if they're mounting a donkey. Badra is a real man, and he knows just what to say and when. He can hold his drink. Let him go as the leader."

The bride's family had already given its consent—there would be no need to abduct her. They rode along singing, firing shots into the air. The village lay in the valley, it had been raining since early evening and the horses' hooves sank into the rain-soaked road. But they entered the yard of the bride's house loudly and cheerfully. The hosts came out to greet them, helping them to dismount. Only when they walked up onto the lighted verandah did they notice that they were all covered with mud and that they could not go inside without first cleaning their boots. Even their whips were soiled; it would be embarrassing to hand them to the hosts. But it was as if Badra had not ridden with

* *Jigit*—skillful and gallant horseman.—*Ed.*

the others: the floor was reflected in his shining boots, and even his whip was not like the others', as if he hadn't pulled a whip out of the top of his boot, but a gun from its case!

"An untidy person ages early. You may live with the same woman one hundred years, but when you come to her—you must be a *jigit*! " Badra said, smiling.

"Who's arguing! " they grumbled noisily. "Only tell us how you managed to keep clean along the way. We know you didn't sprout wings and fly! "

And again Badra smiled, but he offered no explanation.

They had had a good time that night and walked out tipsy into the yard, singing "Uaridada", accompanied by their hosts. Badra had drunk no less than the others, but unlike them, as soon as he climbed into the saddle he reached beneath the pommel, and pulling out two covers of coarse sackcloth, fitted them over his boots and shoved his whip down into his boot top.

That was the kind of person Barkun Badra was!

"He's the type who gets down from his horse and leaves the harness dirty," he would say of a worthless person.

...Ever since Badra had begun to hang the lock on the stable door, no one looked in except for him. Only a ray of sunlight stretched from wall to wall, and the sparrow hopped at Bzou's feet. The sparrow was fearless, wasn't afraid of being crushed by a hoof. The sun rose high in the heaven, and still his master had not come... Maybe he was drawing water from the well, or

was gathering the corn stalks which hung from the branches of an old hornbeam? He would come reeking of corn stalks. Bzou's legs had grown weary of their impatient drumming. Surely he would come presently... "Easy, Bzou, easy! "—and he would lift up each leg in turn, and if, as had happened when he was a colt, there was a fungus on his hoof, he would dig around it with a knife, sprinkle gunpowder on it and burn it off: it was frightening, but the pain immediately died down.

He would come...

He would brush him with the currycomb until Bzou's black coat shone, and then he'd lead him to the river and slap him and drive him chest-deep into the icy water. Then Bzou would gallop to the clearing, where the gelding grazed alone. Bzou could never get used to it: as soon as he saw the white rocks at the river bank, he would be seized with trembling. But his master would pat his neck affectionately and urge him into the water... Trembling and snorting, Bzou would then jump out onto the rocks, and he had only one desire—that the world turn into an enormous empty field where he could gallop, gallop without a bridle.

The sun ray was growing shorter and shorter. The sparrow flew away again...

...Once—this was on a long journey—his master had let go of the reins: his arms were tired and he decided to let the horse rest after trotting for so long. That was all Bzou had needed! He tore off at a wild gallop, leapt over some sort of collapsed bridge, and had

rushed forward so suddenly that Badra had been dislodged from the saddle. The horse was wild, but when his master had called him "Bzou! Bzou! " he had come back.

If his master would only remember...

Yes, he would come!

Or let him call, like he had then, and no doors, no locks would be able to hold back Bzou.

A dark cloud must have covered the sun: the sun ray had been extinguished.

Mournfully, like a colt separated from its mother, Bzou neighed. He was accustomed to finely chopped corn stalks sprinkled with salted water. And he began nosing through the trough for the tiniest, most tasty bits—he always had an abundance of food, and there were leftovers from the night before. But his thirst was so great that he had no taste for the stalks. Bzou turned away from the trough. He was used to being groomed every morning, led out into the fresh air and allowed to run—even a tiny bit.

Bzou knew that his master would not be coming today: he would probably come tomorrow. Once again the sparrow flew in with the dusk, squeezing in through the chink; it hopped and flitted about, pecking in the trough. It flew in every morning and evening...

The night was already half over. The sky was starless—Bzou peered out through the crack: it was dark, like the stable. And then he saw a vision of his master entering suddenly, throwing on his bridle and leading

him out through the gates. They went further, further from the house, until a field opened up before them ... there were people's shouts and the clatter of horses' hooves in the background. Kharun burst out from the crowd and, smiling joyfully, his master gave him the reins... Shuddering, Bzou came to and neighed weakly. Immediately someone's anguished wail came rolling through the yard, and Bzou jumped back from the wall. The wail was repeated, blending in with people's voices, and continued all through the night...

Unfamiliar people came into the stable in the morning and threw Bzou an armful of corn stalks into the trough, not even bothering to chop them up with an axe. And the next day they put on Bzou's harness and led him out of the stall. He didn't mind being touched by strangers anymore—as long as they let him walk about the yard... But the people! Bzou had never seen so many people in the yard. Only at the races did such a crowd gather.

His master was probably setting out on a long journey. Bzou wore his best saddle. The straps of the new harness still smelled of leather, and the iron of the bit was also new and unfamiliar. They threw something black over him, like his master's felt cloak, that covered his neck and his crupper. People passed by, stopping now and then to fondle him and then turning away to wipe their eyes. Why didn't his master drive them all out of the yard and take him away, like he led him away after the races?.. Someone's hand took the reins. A protracted wailing resounded from the street,

and they led Bzou quietly by the reins, the people following...

...Again they locked him in the stable and left. At dawn, as always, the sparrow flew in. As always, the thin ray of sunlight stretched from wall to wall. The wails which had tortured Bzou for three days had died down. And life flowed on as before. As if the sky had cleared after a storm.

But Bzou waited for his master. How he had waited for him all these days! But from the yard came neither the sound of footsteps, nor the familiar voice. And the house was quiet...

But he would come! He had to come...

And finally there were actually the sounds of voices. Bzou heard the sound of jangling keys and pricked up his ears: the voices were high-pitched, he had never heard them near the stable before. The door opened, and at the threshold, dressed in black, stood Badra's wife Msyguda. As far as Bzou could remember, she had only brought him his fodder once or twice. And that was beneath the kitchen awning which was so low that you couldn't raise your head. He had been overcome by the heat from the stove, and smoke had burned his eyes. But Bzou couldn't remember her ever entering the stable. Behind her stood another woman in a dress that reached down to her heels. Bzou had seen her a few times in the yard. She had always been with a little boy dressed in short pants and barefooted...

"Look," this woman once said, nodding towards Bzou. "Look: there's your milk brother. Look how

he's prancing! "

Bzou hadn't been prancing; he simply shifted from one leg to another. She looked at him rapturously. But the boy hung back timidly. He had kind eyes though, and his face seemed to be lit up with happiness. There was no need for him to be afraid. Even if he came up and grabbed onto Bzou's mane, Bzou wouldn't hurt him. Once, saddled, he stood at the tethering post. The boy ran into the yard and his master called him over affectionately:

"Come here, Kunta, come on over! "

"Won't Bzou hurt me?"

"He won't hurt you, don't worry," Badra said, lifting him up and placing him in the saddle. How light he had been! If Bzou were to break into a short run, he would probably have fallen off. His legs didn't even reach the stirrups, he was such a little fellow. And Bzou held himself perfectly still, and only rubbed his muzzle against his master's shoulder.

"Now you've met your milk brother," Badra joked, lifting the boy out of the saddle.

"How tall he is! I could probably walk under his belly without even bending over! "

"I should say so! " Badra burst out laughing. "See what a milk brother you have."

"Mama tells me the same thing. But can a person and a horse really be milk brothers?"

"Why not? You and Bzou drank the same milk. Bzou had just been born, and you went and caught the measles. What could we do? I went to Bzou's mother and asked for some milk for you—thick and yellow. A whole wooden cupful! "

"And I drank it?"

"And how! With pleasure."

"And where is Bzou's mother now?"

"I sold her."

"So it's true that Bzou and I are kin," Kunta agreed after thinking a bit, and his eyes sparkled.

"Blood brother", "milk brother"—all these words people thought up to bind their relationships of course meant nothing to Bzou. But when those shining black eyes had first gazed at him, Bzou's heart had been filled with tenderness.

"I wish I hadn't sent Kunta off to school. He would be able to help you now," said the boy's mother, peering into the stable from the threshold. Now she didn't say "blood brother" or "milk brother". And the former smile was no longer on her face. People probably only used these words when they were in a cheerful mood.

"Well, what are we going to do now? How's your daughter making out?" she asked. "I saw her at the funeral, but didn't have a chance to talk. I've heard that she's doing real well."

"All right, thanks. She's my only hope. Sometimes I ask her to come by, sometimes I go to see her myself... God grant my son-in-law good health, he thinks of me as his own mother," Msyguda answered. She brought Bzou water not in a pail, not in a bowl, but in something pot-bellied and strange, and set it before him. Bzou did not go over to it immediately, but circled around it, snorting. But his thirst got the better of him. He cautiously put his lips to the water, and the smell of soot, smoke, and burnt maize porridge struck his nostrils. He turned away.

Even when rain was pattering on the roof and the wind pressed storm clouds to the earth, Bzou always knew when the sun rose. And with the sun came his master. He was still waiting for him. He heard the jangling of keys and the click of the lock, and trembled in agitation and hope. He did not make trouble for his mistress when she came, but her visits brought no joy, and he submissively endured her presence in the stall. So, waiting, he met the coming of winter. The small lake at the foot of the mountains was covered with a thin layer of ice, the trees were frozen lifeless and resounded drily beneath the blows of a woodcutter's axe. The hills turned dark, as if covered with smoke... But time went by, and they began to turn green again, and the ice on the lake cracked and melted: spring had arrived. The earth waited passionately for it; the earth had enough patience to wait. But what heart could endure that which the earth endures!

As before, Msyguda threw on the halter with the long lead and, urging him on, led Bzou out into the yard. Bzou was quietly astonished: the gelding, his head lowered, was standing right by the gate. Over the winter he had grown emaciated, his bones jutted out like the chopped off twigs upon which corn stalks were hung.

Bzou's master receded further and further from Bzou's life. And strangely enough—now the gelding would let Bzou approach him more and more often. Bzou neighed with pleasure, seeing the old horse on the common. And now the gelding had come of his own accord and called to his brother from behind the gate.

"You've been standing too long, poor thing. You need to frisk about and run... But you won't run away—you'll come back, won't you?" Msyguda said to Bzou, as if to a person. This wasn't the first time she had set him loose before feeding him. Bzou looked at her with his big eyes, trying to understand what this woman was saying to him. Ah, if only he could understand human speech, if only he knew what Msyguda said, he would cease pining for his master.

The woman opened the gate, and Bzou's legs carried him out into the free expanse. He raced along, barely touching the soft earth with its covering of early spring grass. And in full gallop, as if his master was sitting in the saddle and had tugged sharply on the reins, he stopped abruptly and skidded on all four hooves, and then once again, prancing and kicking, he tore along—now straight, now sideways. The grey gelding stood by the gate and looked on dully, like an old dog ordered not to go near a skinned carcass.

"Walks around like a shadow, a lost soul... He'd be better off it they shot him," Msyguda said angrily, looking at the gelding. She picked up a clod of earth and hurled it at the horse. But the gelding just gave a feeble flick with his tail and bore the pain with indifference.

How Bzou hated it when Msyguda drove him back into the yard! He would squint at her, his head lowered, as she approached talking to him gently, but would not let her pick up the rein and ran off as if in fright. Msyguda tried to lure him by a dish of kernels of corn. "Here boy, here boy," she called. But more often she would call the neighbor's boy Kunta over to help.

"Why don't you let him graze in the field," Kunta advised, like an adult. "That way he'll be able to eat his fill."

He took pleasure in helping a grown-up, and even put on airs.

"Yes, dear," Msyguda said. "You've spoken well; the grass is young and he can graze during the night... But won't he overeat? His master loved him so much, and he knew just what he needed. How can I set him loose? Bad folk will come and take him away. He'll run as long as his legs carry him, no matter who gets in the saddle! "

"When I grow up I'll ride him."

"Let's pray that you grow up quickly! Bzou loves you."

Together they led Bzou towards the gate. Frolicking, he ran up to the gelding, sniffed him and snorted, tossing his head: the gelding smelled sharply of sweat and gadflies. He stood with his eyes half-closed, and tufts of hair hung from his thin flanks.

"Whose horse is that, Grandma Msyguda?" little Kunta asked.

"What does it matter! If they looked after him properly, he would be worth something now. But whoever took a fancy rode him and they ran him down. And now what is he good for? His master drove him out."

"Look at all the flies on his back! And he has so many sores..."

"Other people didn't even think to put a cloth beneath his saddle. They threw on an undressed skin and rode him. And they made his skin sore. But I can

remember the time when people would fight over him..."

"Grandma Msyguda, are you going to send Bzou to the pasture this year?" Kunta asked, leading Bzou into the yard and locking the gate.

"I don't know, dear. If I can find someone to look after him, then certainly I'll send him."

Bzou's first stay in the mountain pastures had been quite an unpleasant experience: there were frequent rains, and when the wind blew it was so cold that he was chilled to the bone. True, his mother had been beside him... She would neigh anxiously, calling him back from the edge of precipices which made his heart stop beating. And his master called him back sternly too. Then Bzou had no need of the succulent grass—it only hampered running—he was content with his mother's milk. And the people didn't take much pleasure in the mountains either. It's hard for a person seeing the snowy peaks close for the first time, what with the winds, rains, damp fogs, cruel hail... How small and insignificant man feels among precipices and overhanging cliffs! But if he is courageous, he will come to love the mountains. And will yearn for them till his dying day. And how many animals get lost in the mountains! But then there was something about these mountains—even if misfortune occurs, if an animal breaks a leg, by the time the next summer rolls around and the leg has healed, it yearns for the dangerous paths once again.

How did Bzou manage to survive, how did he escape falling into a precipice—perhaps the heavens had granted such a horse a long life? The cliffs lured him. His mother once grew angry and bit his withers, and it

swelled up and hurt for a long time. From the day of his birth he was constantly in motion, as if the earth beneath him was on fire! And once, as he headed full speed up a steep slope, he almost went crashing from a cliff—he would have tumbled into the precipice if his legs hadn't crumpled up from fear. His mother ran over and tugged him away with her teeth. With difficulty Bzou raised himself on his trembling legs and flicked his tail guiltily. His mother was so furious that he would not have gotten off with just one bite if not for Badra's imperious shout, who was frightened for them both...

Bzou returned home without feeling the least attachment for the mountains. And twice after that he ascended into the mountains with his master, but it seemed that they were not for him, although with the years he got used to the tiny grass plots on the slopes. And here, with death lurking nearby, he found a dizzy happiness. Like a bird knows when the time has come to fly to distant lands, so he sensed the approach of the mountain season. He grew uneasy, as if he could already hear the rustle of the grass, the fresh pure breath of the wind. He ran up to the road which led into the mountains, sniffed the tracks left by the horses' hooves and neighed.

The herd of the Apsara village gathered on the common where the solitary grey gelding grazed. The horses neighed and kicked, and when the herders drove the herd towards the road, Bzou was the first to rush ahead, flaunting his strength and speed. The gelding hobbled along sullenly behind. Bzou had never known him to make it all the way to the mountains. Either

the herders drove him away, or losing his strength, he himself would return to his common. And the whole summer long he would roam around the trampled, withered grass, tormented by the gadflies...

The last time Bzou had descended from the pasture wearing a saddle—ah, Bzou, the last, the last time!

The whips whistled and cracked. The herders, mounted on horseback, circled around, keeping the horses together. The foals whinnied, and the mares twirled around, nipping at the sucklings... But Bzou raced around the yard: how could he stay! He ran up to the gate, but the fence was too high for him to jump over. Msyguda brought out the halter. What for? Why didn't she just open the gate and he would fly out! The herd had not forgotten him. Bzou stretched out his long neck and watched longingly as the horses left, kicking up clouds of dust. Barely managing to reach his mane, Msyguda threw on his halter.

"When it's racing time, everyone has time for you... Whoa, boy, you'll crush my legs, you devil," she grumbled. "And no one wants to look after you. And what can I do?"

She gathered up the reins and led Bzou over to the herd.

"Don't be offended, Msyguda. But if something happens to him, I won't be held responsible," the elder herder announced.

"That's true: all of your possessions wouldn't be enough to pay for him! " Shakhan put in spitefully. As usual, he had come to see the herd off.

One of the herders shook his head doubtfully: "We can take him all right. But someone has to keep an eye on him! We had an awful time with him last summer! " And then he added: "Take a woodpecker—its head will start aching if it doesn't hammer at trees. And the same goes for Bzou. Whenever a bird takes up in the air, like a mountain turkey for example—he races off after it as if someone lit a fire under him. And the herd? The herd, of course, follows him. If Badra was still alive it would be different. He never took his eyes off Bzou. He could call him, and even if Bzou were a verst away he'd be back in a flash! He talked to Bzou as to a person. He knew this horse inside out."

"So what are you saying? Get rid of him, no one needs him? But how many times did he win prizes for our village at the races! "

"Don't get me wrong! Take him yourself and look after him. It's all the same to us! "

Bzou did not touch the grass the whole night long. The clatter of the horses' hooves hummed in his ears. They were going to the mountains, the mountains! Bzou raced around the yard which was surrounded with sharp palings, like bayonets. The wind drove dust around the deserted field. The grey gelding had left with the herd. But by midday he came dragging back, having only made it halfway... People were amazing creatures! They didn't take along a fleet-footed racer so as to avoid the extra bother, but neither had they any use for an old jade. That's the way people were. They clapped their hands raw at the finish of the races, whistling and shouting—as if a herd of horses had broken loose. They did everything short of lifting up the

winner, and that they would have done if they could... They led him around by the bridle to cool him off, ran to fetch well water for him! Everyone patted him and stroked him as if he were a sacred stone.

It had been so long since he had had a bath in the fast flowing icy river! The gadflies buzzed in his ears, circling around and around... Maybe they had flown over from old Grey? Bzou was always tormented by the unwashed smell whenever he came near the gelding. Oh, how he hated this yard, this gate, this fence! The birds twittered faintly at sunrise. It began to grow lighter, the field grew wider and wider, and the road leading to the mountains extended further and further, beaten hard by horses' hooves. He, too, had stamped the earth hard with his hooves before the gate. He would shove his chest against the gate and back off in despair. He could jump over the gate easily but he still didn't know that. And so the only thing left for him to do was to look at the road, stretching out his neck, and pace around the yard... But then the time came when, as if answering a call, he sailed lightly right over the hateful fence without even grazing it with his hooves.

He looked around the field. And his senses picked up the distant trembling of the earth beneath the hooves of the herd—just like a hound he picked up sounds from far away! And familiar smells began to arouse his blood. He had no saddle, there was no one to pull on his bridle, and the winding road lay ahead of him...

Someone who didn't know Bzou would have probably thought that he was being pursued by wolves.

But who didn't know him in Apsara and the nearby villages?

"He'll overtax himself! What does he know! " an old woman mourned, encountering him outside the village. She had heard the rapid pounding of hooves and had stepped aside to the road: at first she thought riders were racing by.

And the old water-carrier was vexed with Bzou's fate. At dawn he had harnessed his bullocks, and the cart went creaking along the road. From behind the barrels only his head was visible and the crook of his staff with which he never parted. When the drumming of hooves began to draw near, the startled bullocks began to toss their horns.

"Easy, you sluggards, damn you! " the old man shouted. And then he muttered to himself, suddenly angry at someone: "We Apsara folk don't deserve to have fine horses. These horned beasts suit us better! " He began whipping the bullocks with a switch, but they paid it no attention.

Another horse would of course have overtaxed itself and dropped dead along the way. But Bzou was built to run, and a swift gallop was to him what trotting was to another horse. And the tracks left by the herd became increasingly fresh, and steam still rose up from the horse dung. And the wind carried a familiar smell, just like that of old Grey—of sweat and gadflies... Bzou had seen him along the way, he had stood in a clearing, his head lowered. His mane had grown and was all tangled. Bzou rushed happily towards him. But the gelding had bared his yellow teeth and nipped at him maliciously. Why had he done that? Hadn't

Bzou also been abandoned by those who had left for the distant mountains? Bzou could not comprehend the hatred of the tormented old jade to whom he was drawn, as if he had a presentiment...

The dust kicked up by the herd had still not settled. Now the mountains rose before him, and meadows stretched out at their base. Bzou remembered their succulent grass, their cold spring water which dashed in a cloud of spray from rock to rock. Here the horses were always unburdened. Even Bzou, who had never known any other weight than his master's in the saddle, had used to be given a chance to rest. From here led a path along which no horse would gallop. Stones went scattering out from beneath the hooves and a steep slope rose overhead. And the higher the road ascended, the colder and easier to breathe the air became. The last of the gadflies which had plagued the horses were left behind.

"What's that over there? Look! "

"It couldn't be ... yes, it's Bzou! "

"But look, he's all in a lather..."

"Lather my eye—he's fair smoking! Msyguda's probably noticed he's missing by now..."

"If something happens to him, it won't be our responsibility. He came on his own."

"Lose a horse like this and you'll never hear the last of it. This, my dear friends, is a treasure! " Shakhan concluded, as was his custom. He was still with the herd.

Bzou met with varying receptions: some were glad to see him, others were angry, as if it was the horse's fault that it didn't belong to them. They had lifted the

packs off the horses and made a fire. Bzou flew at a full gallop into the midst of the herd. He was as happy as a young colt and couldn't calm down. He would go running out, prancing and kicking, and then once again go tearing into the middle of the herd. He hadn't eaten a thing since the herd had been driven off, and now he was starved. But that was all right, tonight he would eat his fill and rest. Even if he went hungry it didn't matter—the important thing was that he had caught up with the herd. In the morning he would lead them as they climbed higher up into the mountains. To the noise of waterfalls. They were still barely audible from here. But even here the air was different from that in the lowlands—how quickly his coat had dried!

In the mist of early dawn the bridles jangled and a dark stream of smoke from the extinguished camp fire melted into a milky fog. The voices of the herders called to one another:

"Don't pack up the same horses as yesterday! "

"Saddle up the others! "

"Here, boy," Shakhan called, heading towards Bzou and rubbing his rough palms together.

Bzou didn't shy away from the bridle—it was only another's touch that he could not stand. The bridle led him out of the stable where he spent the night. And, bridled, he was also led to the circular field which he loved more than anything else on earth. But now a stranger was putting on the bridle. Well all right, if that's the way they wanted it, if the circular field wasn't enough, let a stranger mount him—Bzou would lead both the people and the horses into the mountains. Let him climb into the saddle. In the mountains

there was grass which grew so high it would sting your eyes, and the water was delicious. Why did people call these slopes barren? Let Shakhan mount him, even load him up if there was no other way. Bzou would carry them.

He thought about the path uphill, about what the load would be like. But everything had been decided without him over the night fire.

The herders walked over to Shakhan, chuckling softly:

"This one's found himself a fine horse," said one. "Just watch out—by evening you'll be too worn out to even lift your hand! "

"The hands aren't important. Just as long as you're still in one piece. Aren't I right? You're a brave one, Shakhan! "

There were some who were filled with envy: "They say, if a goat is not fated to starve, the branch will bend down to it. Your mare is lucky, Shakhan! She's never even dreamed of the mountains! "

"She's only good for carrying sacks to the mill," Shakhan said, saddling Bzou. "Let her pick up some strength, or she won't be able to carry the sacks. Well, let's have a ride on Bzou then."

Shakhan had only seen Bzou at the races, of course, and had never even dreamed of mounting him. Why waste time on empty dreams? You have your own horse, and that's fine. No matter what kind, at least it's yours.

He suddenly burst out laughing.

"If Kharun had known that there was a chance to ride Bzou even only from here to Apsara, he would

have walked all the way here on foot! "

"If he finds out you've ridden Bzou he'll have a stroke. Don't you say anything to him."

"I've never known someone to go so crazy over a horse."

"It's just like with a woman. You get her under your skin and walk around like a sick person."

"That's the type Kharun is. When he was young he broke his leg over a roe deer. And now he won't leave Bzou alone until he winds up breaking his neck. You don't come across many like that! "

"But my horse is worth more to me," Shakhan said. "I couldn't care less about looks. What good are they? I don't see much good in Bzou. He's wild. A hare runs just as fast. And maybe faster... You go to the races and watch him, and that's all. What else is he good for, I ask you?" Shakhan carefully, cautiously tightened the saddle girth. "All right, fellows. Hope all goes well for you in the mountains."

"Thanks for coming along."

"Look after my mare. She won't be much of a problem."

"Don't worry. You got her here, now she'll run light."

"Are you kidding? No running for her any more! Her spine's bent from the sacks. In another year or two she won't be worth two kopecks! "

Shakhan hopped on one leg, trying to put his foot into the stirrup.

"What are you standing there for—help him! " the elder herder said.

Msyguda had not slept a wink for two whole nights

as this new misfortune had descended on her home. She had searched in all the fields and grass plots she knew in the region, taking along the neighbor's boy Kunta to help. She had run herself ragged, and the youngster was totally dispirited. "Now I understand why my husband kept him locked up. How right he was when he used to say: 'A beautiful horse is the same as a beautiful daughter! You have to keep your eye on them! ' And I made fun of him... 'A horse is not human,' I said. Now I've lost him. I've disgraced my husband's memory. But honestly, what good is Bzou to me? By the time Kunta grows up, the horse will already be old. Or others will have ruined it," Msyguda grumbled to herself. "To keep a horse like that is more trouble than taking care of a kid. I'm not as strong as I used to be. Let the collective farm take him. When it's racing time the whole region is here, all the bosses hanging about... So let them take care of him. They didn't want to take him to the mountains... 'The responsibility is too big.' But I don't have any more strength left! "

Msyguda grieved terribly. Kunta tried to console her:

"Grandma, we'll find him! You'll see, he won't ever get lost again. I'll keep a watch on him myself! "

"Little fool, do you think you could handle him? If you were big, I'd give him to you—enjoy him in good health! "

"But I'm not little anymore! Grandpa Badra put me up in the saddle a whole year ago. And I've grown a lot since then! "

Msyguda only sighed.

"You and I are fine riders, as long as someone holds the bridle for us! "

She looked around at the empty yard. The stable door was flung wide open, the wind was whipping around...

"Go on home, Kunta."

"But can I come again tomorrow? We'll look for him some more."

"No dear, we won't find him now. Everyone is busy with work in the fields. We'll wait a day or two until things ease up, and then we'll ask men to help. There are still a few left in the village! "

And at that moment came the sound of a horse's hooves pounding on the road. The rider reined in the horse from a full gallop at the gate.

"Bzou! " Msyguda clasped her hands together. The horse was all in a sweat, as wet as if it had just come out of the river. Msyguda embraced its muzzle.

"It's Bzou! Our Bzou has come back! " Kunta cried joyously and ran over to open the gate.

The rider rode the horse into the yard. Only now, coming to her senses, did Msyguda recognize the rider: my God, it was Shakhan!

Shakhan jumped to the ground and, wobbling unsteadily like one drunk, led the horse to the tethering post.

"Oh, Msyguda! All your troubles have fallen on my shoulders. You can laugh, but I'll never ride that devil again! I'm telling the truth. I've seen quite a few horses in my time—you know yourself, they're all I've known... But this one..."

Msyguda was not listening. She gazed at Bzou. He

was back!

"Want to know where he caught up with us?" Shakhan continued. "You won't believe it: right at the mountains! "

"And I walked my legs off, thinking he was lost... It never even occurred to my fool head that he could've followed after the herd! Thank you, dear Shakhan. You'll be rewarded for your kindness! "

"Okay, okay ... we'll settle accounts later. It's true what they say—a horse has to be born a racer. I can remember Bzou's sire and grandsire—they were just the same, the whole line of them. Ungovernable till the day they died. A good strain, but awfully willful."

"Submissive horses don't make racers, Shakhan. Submissive ones need spurs... But Bzou is gifted, and has a special character. If you know how to treat him, then he'll obey you. And he'll bring you glory. The millstones are strong, but if you throw a nail between them, they will break. You have to use your head with Bzou... After all, he belongs to the whole village! "

"Who's arguing, Msyguda! Raising a horse is just as hard as raising a child, you devote your whole life to it." Shakhan sighed and sank down wearily beneath a tree. There was dignity in his voice: one would have thought that it was he who had devoted his entire life to raising Bzou. But Msyguda continued:

"He needs affection, good care... He needs a smart master."

"I'm going to look after Bzou from now on," Kunta chimed in.

Shakhan gave the boy a sour look and then laughed.

"Yes ... in words! A job like this calls for a man! "

"You're wrong, Shakhan. In a couple of years he'll be able to ride Bzou. Badra used to look at them and joke: 'milk brothers! ' Kunta will make a good master."

"You just wait till the corn stands high and you'll see what tricks Bzou will get up to," Shakhan said, turning to the boy, although it was obvious his words were directed at Msyguda. "Do you think the fence will hold him back?"

"Then what can I do?"

"I did a little thinking while riding along. You are all alone at home, except when your daughter visits with her husband. You sit here like a wild dove hunter. Always alone. Whatever you say, you're no longer young. You can't handle a horse like this! And who can you ask? There are a lot of men out there, but they've all got their own jobs to do. Who dreams about Bzou night and day? Kharun! " Shakhan even spat contemptuously.

"Kharun sent people to Badra offering to pay a triple price for Bzou. But Badra would not hear of it. 'If I sell Bzou,' he said, 'it certainly won't be to him.' "

"Kharun's a strange one," Shakhan said. "A hard person to figure out. If he lived in the olden days, he would have gone after the daughter of the tsar himself. He's just not all there."

"He's got a weakness for beautiful things..."

"That's just what I'm saying! I know well just how he broke his leg. Others told me... He wanted to catch the roe deer barehanded. Said he hated to shoot it, ha-ha-ha! They barely managed to drag him home on a stretcher. Because of his greed he was left a cripple... And at the races! Or have you forgotten? It was a

laugh! And a sad thing too." Shakhan chuckled but his eyes remained riveted on Msyguda.

"My husband regretted that day. We lost the prize."

"You have to know how to use the whip! And you can ruin a good horse in no time," Shakhan went on slyly. "I've been around horses all my life, ever since I was born, you might say. No one knows them any better. And Kharun just flapped his arms! It's a laugh! "

Msyguda was used to putting her trust in men; how could she know where Shakhan was leading. Why was he going on about Kharun? He had started out talking about horses, about himself, the big expert. He was ridiculing Kharun because Shakhan had little of worth to say about horses. What can you say about a thing you only know from hearsay?

It is known that rats are the first to sense the onset of an earthquake. Shakhan noticed Msyguda's confusion. But he feared that she might concede to Kharun, who would not grudge a triple the price for Bzou. Then Shakhan would not stand a chance.

And so he pressed on:

"You spoke wisely when you said that a good horse belongs to the whole village. That's thinking on a social scale! But if Bzou falls into Kharun's hands..."

"Then where am I going to find someone who knows about horses?"

"And the races! Who will lead him out? You won't be able to. And what will people say?"

"I just don't know what to do."

"Take a look over there: all his shoes are already worn-down! You won't be able to re-shoe him—and

he won't be able to walk, much less race. But I would shoe him, and see that he was properly looked after..."

Bzou stood at the tethering post. His moist eyes shone as he listened to the people's talk. The voice of the man sitting beneath the tree sounded sugary, unfamiliar. From time to time the young boy would cry out, seizing Msyguda's hand... Bzou whinnied softly, anxiously. If only she would walk over and unbridle him, take off the saddle and the stiff leather cloth which flayed the skin on his back. Even if she didn't rub him down, like his master, the wind would dry him off. And he wouldn't care if the water smelled of maize porridge... His throat was parched! Now he wouldn't shudder, wouldn't start back, if she stroked him. He would nuzzle up to her himself. If only Kunta came over at least!

In the meantime the people had worked out an agreement. Now the man was getting up, striking his dusty boots with a branch, and heading towards Bzou. Kunta cried out plaintively. For Badra had promised him the horse—not now, but in two or three years he would certainly have given him Bzou. He would have sat him in the saddle and led him out to the circular field. One winter had passed, there were only two more to wait. Kunta's voice trembled.

"The owner sold his horse, but the stable-hand won't give him up! " Shakhan tore himself free from the boy's tenacious grasp. "Now get out of here! "

Shakhan was gripped with exultation and fear. Just like a hunter when a deer gets unexpectedly in the sights of his gun. Something beyond his wildest dreams! Shakhan didn't even tighten the saddle girth: he had to

hurry; Msyguda had raised the corner of her kerchief to her eyes, she still might change her mind... The saddle began slipping down, but somehow Shakhan managed to scramble up on the horse and struck his heels into its flanks.

They raced through the village in a cloud of hot dust. And gay thoughts raced through Shakhan's head:

"The old woman has lost her mind: selling such a horse for a song! She's a fool... There's truth in what they say: when you buy a house, find out first who built it. If the son sells it, he'll give it away cheaply. The old woman's a fool, but what if she changes her mind? I'll have to get the money together tomorrow... Stand it over at once, and then the deal is done! Now Kharun will be running after me like a puppy... Wanted to catch a roe deer with his bare hands! .. Felt sorry for it, didn't want to shoot it. I won't be sorry, no such fool! Nowadays you can't take anything by force... It's like the saying: 'let your horse run beneath the stick, mine will run out of happiness'! Get your money ready, lame one! Not what you offered the old woman—I won't even begin to consider that... Whoa, Bzou! What are you trying to do—break the reins? What are you looking around for? You can forget the road leading there... Whether I sell him or harness him, whose business is it! My mare is good enough for me, let her pick up strength in the mountains. For the time being this one will take her place... Whoa, fellow, you've torn my arms off! I've seized him in broad daylight, just like a bandit... The glory of the village! What is glory? Can you eat or drink it? Today is my lucky day! "

Shakhan wound the reins up tightly on one hand and with the other grabbed onto Bzou's mane. If he could just hold on. Let the whole village see him!

The sun was sinking towards the sea. Bzou's chest and flanks were covered with lather. The dust flew up in his tracks, and soon he was not black, but grey...

The hot summer months passed, the herders returned, and Shakhan sold Bzou with a light heart.

The life of the black horse took a sorrowful turn for all that he was well fed and pampered. No man could have taken better care of him than Kharun. There was no comparing his stable with Badra's. In Badra's the wind came blowing in just as if you were out in the open. There were innumerable cracks in the walls. At Kharun's not even the slightest breath of wind touched Bzou—it was built the way a stable should be, and rooted with fern. Kharun never came without some treat, without a kind word. He would stroke his muzzle, his flanks... As if it wasn't a horse, but that same roe deer on finely moulded, slender legs. The way its coat had shone in the sun! It was so beautiful, you could lose your mind.

After buying Bzou, Kharun began letting him graze on his best corn field. Tender green grass reached up to his knees. If Bzou grew tired of the grass, Kharun would slice off the frail corn shoots, chop them up finely and pour salted water over them... He always stood beside the trough a bucket filled with pure cold water—Bzou could drink to his heart's content.

But more than once Kharun was forced to chase after Bzou with the bridle in his hands. He would catch up with him at the gate of his former master's house

and bring him back, limping, across the entire village. Then his spirits sunk low.

Yes, with time Bzou came to like his sweet, easy life. His former master faded from his memory, as did smells of long ago. Just as the life sap trickles from a chopped tree, so Bzou gradually forgot about his former life. His new master did not drive him into icy water each morning. Why torture the horse? He didn't force him to run until things began spinning before his eyes. And Bzou began to put on weight. The belts of the saddle girth had to be lengthened—they no longer reached beneath his belly.

If you cut off the water at a mill, the millstones don't stop running immediately. Nor did Bzou lose his racer's excellence immediately. He still pulled tightly against the bridle as he ran.

Kharun tended his horse as best he knew how: he protected him from hunger and cold, but did not protect him from the whip. Because the Lord had not preserved Kharun himself from weakness—he wanted to be out in front, to be the object of people's talk. But things turned out the same as with the roe deer. And it was all because of the way Kharun's head worked. More and more frequently Bzou changed his pace while running and began to thrash his tail—unfitting for a thoroughbred racer! And Kharun's heart worked the same as his head. He never refused anyone a turn in the saddle.

Wedding heralds rode him with whoops and shouts. "The best horse in the herd! How could you refuse a good man in a time of need?" But one person liked it when Bzou toiled like a cart-horse; another preferred

a smooth trot. A third drove him at a full gallop before they made it out of the yard. Now it wasn't a felt cloak that they strapped to the saddle, as Badra used to do, folding it up so tightly that it slipped through the stirrups, but sacks filled with corn. The first time they loaded him down was after the races, when he was still wet and covered with lather. And the load was so heavy his back had almost caved in! And to add to it, Kharun himself had climbed up in the saddle.

Bzou had a hard time of it at the races—it had never been like this before! He gave everything he had—but he barely managed to make five laps. The other horses began to pass him, and he couldn't catch his breath, and his legs could not keep pace for the pounding of his heart...

If he could understand what they were shouting!

"Get the heavyweight off the field! "

"He's driven away all the flies with his tail..."

"Hey, Kharun, hit him harder! "

"He's ready for the mill, for the mill! "

Those were the same throats that used to grow hoarse from joyous shouting. And the same hands, which had once lovingly stroked him after a swift, victorious race now clenched into fists.

The winter drew to an end. The days were gloomy, the fields languished. Bzou roamed about, his hooves squelching in the damp earth. Having lost his former speed, he had also lost his master's affection: now Kharun cast him sour looks; he had other concerns, now that spring was approaching. Once Bzou caught a close

glimpse of the back of his former yard, but he didn't recognize it. Only a dull memory flashed in his head, so distant that it seemed alien. It did not touch Bzou. The flies exasperated him—they gathered on his raw back... A crooked-wheeled cart creaked by. The old water-carrier, singing softly, urged the bullocks on with his switch. The bullocks shuffled along as if they were half-dead. The old man's gaze followed Bzou; he remembered how he had once gone tearing along after the herd, and shaking his head, added to his song words about a legendary horse: "Everything about which his soul dreamt has been extinguished. And that with which his legs were gifted has died."

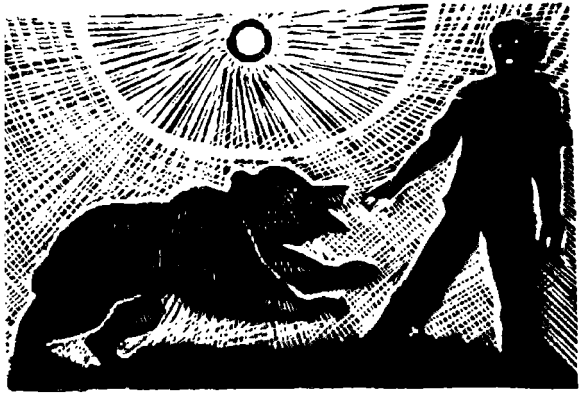
Those were the words.

The old man moved off into the distance, but Bzou looked out from beneath the fringe which hung down in his eyes. The grey gelding stood in the distance, just as before, nibbling on the tough grass. He raised his heavy head. And his long stare was even heavier...

The bullock-cart went weaving slowly along, the staff swayed over the head of the old man as he sang.

Then he looked around.

In the middle of the empty late-winter's field stood two horses. Their lips touched, and the gelding with a neigh, laid his head on the withers of his friend in misfortune.



A Labour of Love*

"Can't you see," said Tarik, "that I've never yet left in such a panic?"

"So you haven't," I said, "but you can't expect me to go there every day, slave all evening, and then travel back and go to work in the morning! "

"Not necessarily every day. There's Volodya. It's one thing if he knows that you may come, and another if he's left free to shirk, don't you see? I'm taking Mika and Fenka with me, so there won't be any bears. And all the dogs are coming too -so much easier on you."

"And where's the feed?"

"You know where I keep the meat and the fish. And the vegetables. Mind you wash the vegetables. The car-

* English translation © Raduga Publishers 1986

rots are sliced lengthwise, the beets in smaller pieces—the fawn has a small mouth. The fish for Seryozha must be washed too."

"You needn't explain to me about Seryozha. The wolves get two kilos each?"

"No less. See that every one gets his ration. On the other hand... Look here, you don't have to feed them yourself. Just see to it that Volodya... Now about keys... Hello! I'll ring you back in a minute—somebody wants the telephone."

The telephone rang.

"It's me again. In short, you know what Volodya is like. Can one put any trust in him? So see that the cages are cleaned."

"All right, all right. I got it."

"Just a minute! You haven't got everything..."

In childhood he liked drawing, clay modelling and wood-carving. He was admitted to the Surikov Art School, and was said to show promise as a sculptor. Also he had an absolute ear for music and a good voice, and his parents taught him music as well—perhaps he would become a pianist.

The boy was obviously endowed with artistic gifts. His parents had no reason to worry on his account—they had a talented son. The only thing that annoyed them was the amount of time he wasted on silly trifles.

At eight he brought home some tadpoles. In a big wash-basin he made sandbanks and slimy pools for them and put in the various crawling, swimming and growing things which constitute the tadpoles' natural environment.

With time the tiny commas assumed the semblance of tailed walnuts. They grew legs. Tarik was planning to make them a bigger home, with taller walls. He had plenty of problems—how to furnish the new home, what food they'd need, where to get it—cares galore.

One morning, bored with his piano exercises, Tarik went out to the balcony and dipped his hands in the basin. With a preoccupied frown on his face, he cleaned, repaired, improved--it was serious work. And he did not hear his mother come up.

She picked up the wash-basin and dashed the tadpoles on the asphalt four storeys below.

Tarik remained squatting on the floor. Water was dripping from his hands. His head thrown back, he was staring unblinkingly into his mother's face.

Many years have passed since, but she will never forget that unforgiving glare of her eight-year-old son.

But it did not deter her from other similar measures. Tarik had a pet white mouse. Somebody had chopped off its tail, and it was called Shorty. Tarik had kept many white mice, but Shorty was special. It recognized its master's steps and voice, sensed his approach from afar, and not every mouse has such gifts.

...He opens the cage. Shorty jumps onto the window-sill and scurries back and forth along its edge until Tarik puts up his palm. Then it dives into his sleeve, and the next moment Tarik feels its soft fur on his shoulder. Tickling his chest with its tiny claws, Shorty lowers itself into the bosom of his shirt and settles down for a snooze there.

Now you may do what you like to Tarik, saw him in two with a dull saw, nag him till you get hoarse—he

is impervious. He is not alone. He has his own portable animal with him. And that animal is the funniest thing imaginable. You can die laughing as you watch it wash its face or relieve itself—drip-drip—always into the ash-tray.

"Tarik, put your music into the folder. How many times have I told you to keep the piano tidy?"

Tarik does not hear—he shakes with laughter watching Shorty drip-dripping into the ash-tray, the mousy face full of concentration.

In summer the family went to the south for a holiday to the seaside. Tarik took Shorty along although his parents were against it. Once, coming back from the beach, he found the cage empty. The door stood ajar.

"You forgot to bolt it," said his mother. But Tarik knew very well that he had bolted the door. How could he have forgotten? He had never seen a place so infested with cats. It was a veritable cats' jungle.

Tarik did not look for Shorty. Where could he look for it? He only clenched his teeth to chase away the terrible vision of a cat playing with a white mouse.

When they returned to Moscow, they bought him a goldfish bowl to make up for the loss of the mouse. But he was scolded for the aquarium as well—wasting a whole evening on some silly fish! He brought home a stray kitten—and was scolded for playing with it.

Tarik would snatch his coat from the hanger, and go to the garret to sleep with the kitten there. He bedded down on the bare floor, put his hand inside his coat,

where the kitten was purring, and went to sleep. And in the morning, instead of going to school, he went to the Zoo. Scold him, grown-ups, for playing truant and making a drawing of a lioness instead!

He went to the Zoo so often that many animals came to know him. The lioness Rita came up to the bars when he called her. Rita's head was a bit on the large side, but that was the best thing about her. She had large features too—a broad forehead, big cheeks, large clear eyes. Her glance was open and bold. Such an animal could be relied on to protect its master. If anybody started picking a quarrel with him, he would just need to call, "Rita, here! ", and she'd come to his side at once.

In the evening Tarik had to go home. He walked across the yard at his lumbering gait—a list to the right, then a list to the left, the heavy shoulders bent, the glance serious but good-natured.

Girls skipping with a rope shouted, "Hello, Tarik! " Big boys standing in a group greeted him, "Hi, Tarik! " One of them, running towards him with a string-bag, gave him a slap on the shoulder, and sprang back, wincing and fluttering his fingers, pretending that he had hurt himself against Tarik's iron muscles.

Women chatting on the bench paused to reply kindly to his greeting. They followed him with sympathy in their eyes. They knew he had trouble, both at home and at school. But he was respectful to his elders. He had his own interests in life. Nobody dared to throw a stone at a cat in his presence. And he was good to the younger children, and let them come to his flat to see his pets. This boy would make out all right.

Tarik's fateful decision was received at home as a major disaster. They refused to believe that it was final, that his fingers, roughened by work, would never run over the piano keys again, that his drawing albums would be put away for years and perhaps for ever.

Tarik left Moscow. He took a job at the Animal Pool, where they kept animals for filming. He fed the animals, walked them, and cleaned their cages. And he helped during the filmings.

Tarik did not suspect that his future was beginning to take shape here, at the Animal Pool. He simply lived among animals because he could not live any other way and, so far, did not give any thought to the future.

There were some bear cubs growing up at the Animal Pool. He found out that they had no use for the young she-bear Mika, who had become so attached to Tarik when she was still quite small that she started whimpering every time he walked away. She called for him, and he came back. He picked her up in his arms, and she nuzzled against his chest with little squeals of joy and tried to lick his face.

When Mika went off food, Tarik became sick with worry—was she falling ill? When she ate well, he enjoyed watching her lap up her milk or crunch a carrot. Whenever somebody gave Tarik a sweet or some nuts, he took them to Mika. Or he'd push an armful of fresh grass into her cage and watch her burrowing in it, selecting some plants by instinct and chewing the so necessary vitamins.

What was going to happen to her? What was in store for her since they did not need her here? Would she be allowed to live at all?

He went to the manager of the Pool and offered to buy Mika. The manager agreed. Tarik had to go to Moscow to borrow the money. He was terribly afraid that the manager might change his mind and he would not find Mika in her cage when he came back.

But the manager was as good as his word, and Tarik now had a bear of his very own. You could not find a busier man in the world: he had his duties at the Pool, and he had to look after Mika. And not merely to look after her physical well-being but also to broaden her outlook.

Mika was placed in a cage standing apart, under a lean-to. What worried Tarik was that she might become too rooted in her ways, fearing any change, and distrusting anything new. She'd probably put up a resistance if he tried to take her out of her cage. That actually happened once.

I was there and saw it. Tarik was dragging Mika out by a rope attached to her collar, while she made funny mooing sounds and clutched at the door of the cage. Then she suddenly panicked and dashed past Tarik. He flung himself on her back and seized her by the collar; braking with his heels he managed to bring her to a stop. I was very much impressed with his courage.

"That was a stunt, riding piggyback on a maddened bear! " I said.

He did not even get my meaning, and that amazed me most.

"My boots slide on grass," he explained. "And Mika's paws don't. If I merely held on to the rope, she'd have dragged me along."

Tarik believed that Mika should have contact with

people not only across the bars of her cage. He thought it would do her good to walk in the streets of Moscow, to ride in trams and buses. That was what he believed, and he would have taken her for those rides, I'm sure, if it was permitted.

As it was, he could only take Mika for jaunts in the nearby wood, and those did her a world of good too. Having walked his fill, Tarik would stretch out on the ground, while the bear dug in the earth chewing some roots, champing and grunting contentedly.

...Mika's head hang over Tarik's face. The bear's eyes were looking into his. Tarik hugged the hairy neck. A neck like that could bear the weight of ten men. What a neck! And what an animal—all muscle and sinew!

Mika licked Tarik's nose and cheeks, growling tenderly.

"Now, cut out the sloppy stuff! Enough I say! Stop it, Mika! "

Tarik was lying on his back, his arms thrown wide. There was the sky overhead. The earth underneath. A warm earth. He was resting—this was his way of resting. Wasn't life marvellous!

By that time he had acquired another animal of his own, an otter by the name of Seryozha. It was only a baby when he brought it back from Kaliningrad where he went with a filming team.

"What did he look like?" I asked.

"As ugly as they make them. A lot of belly, a head of a kind, and legs sticking out—a cross between a

mouse and a frog! "

When I met Tarik, Seryozha was an animal of striking beauty, a royal animal in the full sense of the word. His fur was thick, sleek and soft, his long body so lithe that he seemed to pour rather than to jump from a chair. He had the piercing ruthless gaze of a wild beast, one of the wariest of all, which leads the most concealed kind of existence and disappears at the faintest whiff of danger, or, if flight is impossible, fights like a fiend. But if you offered Seryozha your finger, he started sucking it rightaway. And then you noticed that there was still a lot of the baby in his snub-nosed face.

I came to the Animal Pool to write a film script about a tame otter. So I followed Tarik and Seryozha about, trying to get an insight into their relationship and into an otter's character.

A man strides along a wood path. After him runs an otter at its characteristic humpbacked gallop. It is early spring. There are patches of snow here and there. Down these the otter slides on its belly—otters are extremely fond of all kinds of fun and games, tobogganing included. Hunters know about these wintertime amuzements of otters on snowbound hills.

When they reach the river, Seryozha slips into the water noiselessly, a trail of bubbles marking his underwater course. Tarik watches them tensely.

Eventually Seryozha emerges, dripping wet, his fur glued down, and starts looking anxiously about in search of Tarik. They're afraid of losing each other.

An otter's hearing is acute while its eyesight is not very sharp. Tarik says quietly:

"I'm here, Seryozha."

And the animal, reassured, dives into the river again. Tarik points out to me the tracks of webbed feet on the clay of the bank.

After his swim Seryozha climbs up to his master's shoulders and sprawls there—streaming wet as he is. From that vantage point he looks down imperiously, while Tarik squirms and makes faces as the water trickles down his back.

Then Seryozha begins drying his coat. He rubs his back, sides and belly against his master's knees, but his face he wipes on Tarik's hair. Finally Seryozha is quite dry, fluffy and pleased with himself. In the best of spirits, he jumps down from Tarik's lap, darts aside and makes a mock attack at his master. In a moment they are wrestling on the ground. "Help! " Tarik yells. "Wild beasts are gnawing my hands away! " He laughs and hugs Seryozha and they roll about, and then Tarik jumps up and runs away, the otter galloping in hot pursuit.

There is a little lake in the middle of a broad meadow. Tarik starts running round the lake. Seryozha is doing his best to catch up, but an otter is not very nimble on dry land. Water is its element. But Seryozha is a clever boy, so he jumps into the water and swims to intercept Tarik. Another bout of wrestling. Another chase. This time Seryozha is the pursued.

Laughter. Frolicking. Freedom. A blue spring sky overhead, a blue lake, young shoots of grass on the shore. And stretching away on all sides are fields soggy with spring waters.

But cares kept mounting. Now Tarik already had four charges—a dog Mishka, a polar fox Savka, Seryozha and Mika. He needed a lot of milk, meat, fish and vegetables.

"Gluttons," Tarik grumbled good-naturedly. "Eating me out of house and home! "

But he obviously enjoyed the new cares.

When a film about an otter, *The Lovable Beast*, was being shot, they did not have to seek an actor for the star part. Tarik acted himself. He did not have stage fright when the shooting began, and he could make Seryozha perform too.

With Tarik around, Seryozha minded neither the presence of strangers nor the glaring lamps. He was not afraid of anything and was eager to please Tarik. He fetched fish out of water and placed it at his master's feet, he slept in Tarik's arms in spite of the dazzling spotlights on the two of them, the cameras whirring, and the general bustle and commotion of film-making.

Seryozha was excellent at conveying mood.

The screen play went as follows: a tame otter is lost in the forest. He searches for his master frantically, and, in despair, rushes for help to some strangers. But people run away in fright, and he stares after them, his whole attitude expressing loneliness, his eyes full of bitter dismay.

How did Seryozha and Tarik achieve this? I have no idea. Perhaps the thing they both feared more than anything else—losing each other—happened in the film, and the anguish of it was understandable to both.

Seryozha acted a part in that film, but you cannot call him a trained animal. Simply he trusts people.

And in the film he had to do things he enjoys doing. The prompting was done tactfully. Without a shade of compulsion.

Working in films was a fascinating business and it provided Tarik with the wherewithal to keep his animals. So when cats were needed for the film *A Black Kitten*, Tarik did not hesitate to add four felines to his household.

Later he moved to Moscow with his menagerie, to the Mosfilm Studios. In Pushkin's *Tale of Tsar Saltan* he was given a small part. He was the youngest of the Indian merchants—the one with a monkey perched on his shoulder.

I showed my pass and walked past the sets.

A swarthy Oriental prince in a gem-studded turban, with a dagger in his belt, strolled past me, smoking—not a narghile, but an ordinary cigarette. An imposing-looking gentleman in a frock-coat and top-hat munched a sandwich leaning wearily against a prop wall.

I walked past a variety of sets—a feudal castle with a length of wall, the corner of a mosque, the front of a peasant cottage—all built of boarding and plywood, plastered and painted. The cast-iron chain lying on the asphalt could be lifted with one's little finger.

The trees were shedding leaves. It was drizzling. "I must give the wolves some rowan-berries," I was thinking, "if everything is all right with them."

Now I understood why Tarik had been in such a panic. Ever since he left, I had never once seen Volodya, who had undertaken to look after Tarik's animals. The

evening before, arriving after an absence of three days, I looked through a chink between the boards before unlocking the gate and saw a wolf pacing around with a pronounced limp. That was Loban. The other two were lying prone. Loban seemed to be lame in the front left paw, but he also kept lifting—almost up to his belly—now one hind leg now the other. "He's done it! " I thought drearily. "There's something very wrong with that wolf's legs." Nothing to be surprised at really: a fouled up cage, irregular feeding, God knows what else...

When I entered, the wolves, which were lying down, merely raised their heads a little. Their faces were sort of crumpled, their gaze apathetic. Loban stood in an attitude of perplexity, one leg lifted. I had never yet seen them in such a listless condition.

There was no Volodya in sight. I picked up the heavy metal rod with a crossbar at the end and started scooping out the wet and packed sawdust. Then I doused the floor from a pail. The wolves rose, and all three began walking around. To my surprise I saw that Loban was no longer limping. I had no idea that wolves were so fastidious and hated dirt.

Then I changed the bedding for Lada, the roe fawn, cleaned the cage where a golden eagle and a steppe eagle lived together amicably, attended to the foxes and the eagle-owl. When I had done cleaning and, barely able to drag my feet, decided to feed the animals, I discovered that there was no meat or fish in the box. Just carrots. Seryozha, in the meantime, was squealing from hunger, and the chill autumnal rain was pouring in good earnest. I waited for Volodya, who

never came, and thought about Tarik. *He* had to do all this work day in day out, fair weather or foul. Imagine choosing this kind of life, imagine a man as young as Tarik willingly shouldering all these cares!

...The road was deserted. The nearer I came to the menagerie, the more anxious I felt. True, today I was carrying a sackful of food, but I'd never manage all by myself. It was too much for a mere woman. If only Tarik had left me Volodya's address!

A way off I saw a lorry with a crane, manoeuvring to turn round. There were two empty transportation cages in it. Cages for bears. I could hear excited barking. Was Tarik back? It was too good to be true!

In the gate I saw Tarik leading Mika to her home cage. It stood on a platform, and the bear had to climb a box first and from there step into the cage. I could see her coat ripple over the powerful muscles.

The frenzy of delight in the cages around! Lada was dashing about her pen trampling the feed trough and the water can. Seryozha was scratching the netting with his forepaws, whistling like a bird. The wolves had gone clean crazy—they rushed about, jumped onto the netting and finally gave vent to their feelings by raising their muzzles and howling in chorus. And Tarik stood in front of the cage, his head tilted and sang with them—on the exact wolfey note.

It was pure chance that I came to visit my friends that particular evening. It was a Saturday, and there were other guests. We were sitting round the table, drinking tea with jam and cakes. A man I did not

know, a film-maker, was telling about the work they had just completed—shooting scenes with a bear, for the sake of which the team had specially come to Moscow.

I pricked up my ears.

In the course of their film, the man was saying, the heroine blundered into a bear den concealed under snow. An enraged bear attacked her. A courageous young man came to her rescue in the nick of time, had a wrestle with the bear, killed the beast with his knife and thus saved the heroine.

The director had intended to have a bear actually killed before the cameras: like most film directors he was only concerned with the veracity of the scene. After all, people hunted bears—why not sacrifice one for the sake of art?

He had been told that there was just the right animal-trainer employed by the Mosfilm Studios and that he had a very suitable bear. Now, I asked myself, what did he mean by "a suitable bear"? A tame bear? One that you could kill for the sake of art? And what did he mean by "just the right animal-trainer"? One who could simulate a tussle with a bear? Who could double for the actor in this dangerous scene? Or a trainer who would agree to have his animal killed?

Later I was able to fill in some gaps in the story, to get a perspective, so to speak. Work on the film had dragged out interminably, or so it seemed to all concerned. There had been endless shootings in the studios and on location, endless trips, with nights spent in none-too-comfortable hotels and days spent in strenuous work. Success was giving way to failure, assurance

to doubts. All were tired and only wanted to be done and go home. Moreover, animal-lovers had come forth in the team, objecting to the cruel scene involving the death of a bear. There were endless arguments and a lot of bad blood.

It was with such frayed nerves—and with such intentions—that they arrived in Moscow and met Tarik. They had a preliminary discussion, he showed his animals to the director and his entourage—and the film people sensed a kind of special relationship between Tarik and his animals, something they had not expected to find in an ordinary animal-trainer. So far no mention was made of the final scene.

They chose a location for the bear-den episode—near a deserted road running through a magnificent forest. The bears and the dogs were brought in transportation cages.

They had to film a bear roaming at large. A section of the forest was screened off with wire netting. Tarik was inside it, now with Mika now with Fenka, while the others remained outside the "pen".

Fenka was in excellent spirits, frisked and romped about happily, and then suddenly, as nimbly and quickly as a cat, shot up a tall pine that rose above the netting.

She climbed down slowly, seemingly unable to make up her mind, and ended up not inside the pen but outside it, where the camera crew were at work.

The netting went down gullies and up hillocks, and Fenka ran along it, now disappearing from view, now galloping gaily past the film-makers.

Tarik remained where he was, inside the pen, issuing

commands:

"Don't move! Stay all together! Keep still!"

And then he added, as a warning:

"Don't think of running for it, she'll catch up anyway."

He seemed to say it in all seriousness, but there was the merest suggestion of banter in his intonation, and the director played up to him:

"Tarik, I want to go inside, where you are!"

"You can't," Tarik answered. "No room for two."

"What if I get into the cage while it's empty?" the director pleaded (in a quiet voice, making no movements), "I'll feel easier in my mind, locked up in the cage."

They were pulling each other's leg quite frankly now.

The director's facetiousness might have been a bit strained, but Tarik appreciated a sense of humour exercised in such a situation. And the others, too... They certainly acquitted themselves well, he had to hand it to them.

Now they had to shoot the den with the bear half out of it and the dogs baiting it. Tarik found a hole on a slope, under the roots of an old pine. The hole was deepened with spades, and he noticed Mika watching the proceedings with eager interest. Obviously the den was very much to her liking. When he opened the cage, Mika made a bee-line for the den. How she worked, digging the earth, tossing it out, disappearing inside and then looking out again!

So they had some wonderful shots of a bear in its den.

Then the dogs were released. Not on Mika, God forbid, nobody even dared to mention such a blackguardly idea! Mika had been installed in her cage, and some men with a sheepskin coat, turned inside out, got into the den. They shoved out the sheepskin, and the dogs tore at it enthusiastically. So enthusiastically, in fact, that they finally wrested the sheepskin free and bore it off triumphantly. This made everybody laugh.

"That chap," the narrator proceeded, "created a new, unaccustomed atmosphere in our group, one of gaiety and friendliness. Our mood changed completely. In the evening there was laughter and gay chatter in the hotel rooms. Not a trace of irritation was left. In the morning, when we arrived at our wooded location, he was there waiting for us, bright and cheerful, always with an idea up his sleeve. He was wonderfully inventive. In actual fact, it was he who directed all the 'animal scenes', suggesting angles for shooting, thinking up ways to handle the bear to obtain the desired effect.

"We gazed at him open-mouthed and listened to him open-mouthed. None of us had imagined that there could be such a relationship between a man, a professional trainer too, and an animal. You see, he did not set himself apart from the animals. You could not really call him a trainer. He simply was one of them, an elder but also an absolutely equal member of a group of animals. I felt ashamed of myself," the narrator suddenly confessed, "for being unable to work with such dedication. It was creativity, nothing less!

"Here is another episode. The girl is in the den. An enraged beast with fearsome fangs is bearing down on her. Already she is within its reach. ('Don't be afraid,

she won't do you any harm! ' 'I'm not afraid at all. I was only afraid in the beginning.') The brave lad rushes to the rescue (here the actor is replaced with his double, that is Tarik). They're going to shoot the scene of the tussle, and Mika is replaced with Fenka.

" 'Why did you tussle with Fenka and not Mika?' I asked Tarik later. 'Isn't Fenka too excitable?' 'Yes, but Fenka is lighter. When Mika straddles me, I can only breathe out, not in...'

"The cameras are ready. Now for the dangerous scene. Tarik (wearing the hero's costume) begins a game with the bear. He punches her, tickles her nose, raises his arm as though to hit her—and she raises a paw to hit him back. Fenka is getting into the spirit of the game. Tarik hugs her, and she clutches him in her beary clasp and brings him down. They roll on the ground. The cameras are whirring busily. The people are tense. The animal has become carried away by the game. The man is quite helpless in its hug.

"We saw Tarik stop struggling, his free hand jerked—a barely perceptible jerk of pain—and then he called, 'Topush! ' Did I tell you that he was a wonderful dog—huge and unbelievably clever? This dog raced over and pulled the bear by its ear, ran off and the bear went in pursuit... Tarik rose, squared his shoulders, and straightened his back, a crooked half-smile on his face. I wonder if anybody else ever wrestled with a bear which didn't even wear a muzzle."

"Well, and what about the killing? How did you shoot the dead bear?" I asked.

"That was something else again! Imagine Fenka sprawled on the ground, with a pool of condensed milk

before her nose; Tarik had poured it out so that she could lick it without moving. He rose from the bear with his back to the camera, a bloodied knife in his hand. We didn't spare the red paint—there was enough blood for a herd of bears. Then he turned round—but it was already the actor who turned round. Simple enough, just a matter of cutting. Tarik had chosen the site for the cameras. Fenka was licking up the condensed milk, Tarik was sitting astride it... We made ready, then he rose and walked off... That was all, d'you understand? And it looked wonderful on film. So much for the dead bear," the narrator concluded.

A film studio is a regular little township. There are out-of-the-way corners on its territory, where you can take animals for a walk in the evening. Tarik has taken the wolves out, accompanied by Topush, a huge Saint Bernard, who is kind to people but stern with animals.

In the gateway Tarik nods at a bear's tracks in the mud. I nod back. Isn't it amazing that heavy work and endless cares had not extinguished in him that eternal flame which sears us all in childhood after our first book by Bianki or Seton Thompson?

The wolves are pulling at their leashes. It takes all Tarik's strength to hold them. Suddenly a mini-bus screeches to a stop beside us.

"They've been looking for you high and low! " the driver shouts flinging the door open. "Take the wolves back and I'll drive you over in a jiffy! "

"But I've only just come," Tarik protests.

"They need two dogs for the shooting tomorrow

morning! They're kicking up a rumpus! "

"Tell them I'm busy with my own team tomorrow morning. I can't."

The door is shut with a bang.

"Okay, I'll tell them, but they'll make me go back and fetch you, come hell or high water! " the driver shouts as he steps on the gas.

"Look how they all need you," I say. "I hope it doesn't give you a swollen head."

Tarik laughs and fishes a note out of his pocket:

"Dear Tarik! " I read. "Request you urgently to find a black he-goat for *The Twelve Chairs.*"

The three wolves have been released from their leashes, and I watch the young beasts race in wild delight.

"Watch them run," I hear. "See the difference from the dogs?"

However easily a dog may run, you can see its muscular effort. But wolves just flow along like snow driven by the wind. As though they have no muscles and no strong legs, as though they *are* the wind.

Now the wolves are cantering back. I move aside lest they knock me off my feet. Loban throws himself against his master's legs, and Tarik pats the animal's big handsome head. The she-wolf and the other male are jealous and push Loban away. And the dog keeps an eye on them all the time.

It is getting dark. We are going back. Tarik has a heavy tread. During his last filming trip he grew a beard. He needed no make-up to act the part of a Gipsy bear-leader in the film *Children*. The bear was Mika.

The wolves are inside their cages, and Tarik gives

them their supper—a chunk of meat each, with watermelons for dessert. They sink their teeth into the juicy melons with relish. Besides rowan-berries they also like watermelons and apples.

"How did Mika behave at the filming?" I ask.

"Admirably! Among strangers, mind you. In a cramped pavilion... Mika is really a treasure! "

I push an apple through the netting of Seryozha's cage. The apple rolls into the pool, and the otter dives after it. Tarik gives me a tug on the sleeve. I look round.

The wolves are asleep. They are sprawling at some distance from one another—a small pack of young wolves resting after a long hunt in a secret forest glade.

"I envy nobody in the whole world," Tarik says quietly. "I'm content with my life. I'm pleased with my animals. I'm glad I have them. Life is fine."

"But didn't you complain that other people have holidays and you don't, ever. That you haven't even the right to fall ill?"

"It's true, too," Tarik says stubbornly. "But I don't want any other kind of life."

He opens the door of the pen, and the fawn dances out on its light hooves. The dogs dash out of the gate after it.

Now it's their turn to run, to play, to trample the empty flower-beds of autumn-time.

Trust*

Sleep still clouded Zhakyp's head, but he rose, dressed, and walked out of the yurta, taking his double-barreled rifle down from the yurta's wooden frame. His eyes were still glued together, and he almost stepped on Uchar, who lay curled up at the threshold. Still half-asleep, Zhakyp thought it was a stump of a log that had appeared there from goodness knows where.

The dog jumped up, stretched lazily, and wagging its tail, began jumping at its master's legs as if to say: here I am, ready to go wherever you command.

Shivering from the cold, Zhakyp looked up at the sky: it had just barely begun to grow light. It was time to go! Zhakyp slung the rifle over his shoulder, round-

* English translation ©Raduga Publishers 1986

ed the yurta, and headed towards the woods which surrounded the *ail* on all sides like a solid black wall.

Uchar trotted along behind her master. Now and then she would run ahead of Zhakyp or linger behind, dodging among the trees, constantly sniffing, checking whether a stranger had trespassed on her territory during the night and left tracks or scents.

Zhakyp never took Uchar along with him. Hunting with her was just impossible. She would run aimlessly here and there through the woods and just scare away the wild game. And if she fell behind—she would come running up from behind at breakneck speed and you would get a fright thinking it was some wild beast! Uchar probably realized this and for that reason always accompanied her master to a certain spot—a thickly spreading sea buckthorn bush. She would stop here and look mournfully after Zhakyp until he had disappeared from view. Just as now, running up to the bush, Uchar sat down on her haunches and silently followed after the receding figure of her master with a mournful stare. When Zhakyp had disappeared behind the trees and the sound of his footsteps had faded, she trotted back to the *ail*.

It was cold, damp and dark in the woods. But Zhakyp knew all the paths well and knew just when and where to turn. Everything here was familiar to him, and he walked in the woods just as confidently and calmly as in his own *ail*.

Zhakyp hurried so as to reach the lower swamp before dawn. Here, according to his calculations, roe deer were bound to appear. Yesterday, late in the evening, as he was returning home from work at the for-

estry, Zhakyp had noticed their fresh tracks. The goats couldn't have moved very far overnight. Most likely they would settle down for the night in a thicket somewhere nearby and at dawn come out to graze at the swamp where thick succulent grasses grew.

In the *ail*, all the men were inveterate hunters, and each summer a few families would set up their yurtas on a large clearing in the forest. This was the main reason that they came to stay here in the summer, bringing with them their children, all their belongings, their livestock.

Just as soon as there was some free time from work, the men would be stalking through the woods with their rifles, hunting for hares, partridges, pheasants. But ordinarily no one paid any attention to the tracks of roe deer: a worthless venture! No one yet had ever succeeded in tracking and shooting down this swift, keen-scented and cautious animal. Zhakyp was the only one who had not given up hope. How he wanted to arouse the amazement and envy of all his friends by returning from the hunt with an antlered roebuck.

Zhakyp was considered the best shot among the hunters, which is why they called him Zhakyp-Mergen– who "never missed the mark". Success truly accompanied him all the time, and it was on rare occasions that he would return from the woods without a good catch.

The young boys wouldn't leave Zhakyp alone, and were forever begging him to teach them how to shoot. And as a rule, on Sundays Zhakyp would gather together all the youngsters and take them into the woods. On some clearing he would patiently explain to them how to take aim, and show them how to put the

rifle quickly and firmly to their shoulder, guiding the uncertain hands of the future hunters. At the end of such lessons the boys would beg Uncle Zhakyp to demonstrate his skill. Flattered, Zhakyp would throw up his double-barrel and, without even seeming to take aim, would bring down a stick or branch tossed up by one of the boys. Then he would pull a clean handkerchief out of his pocket and meticulously wipe all the metal parts of the rifle. The boys would follow every movement intently. Zhakyp knew what they were waiting for: chuckling, he would crack the rifle over his knee, ejecting the still smoking cartridges. Then he would distribute them, like prizes, among his best students.

Zhakyp truly deserved his reputation as the most experienced hunter in the *ail*. He knew as no other the secrets of the forest, the habits of the wild animals, their wiles and subterfuges, and could unerringly make sense of any confused tracks. He would walk through the forest without making a sound. Although he was convinced that no matter how carefully a hunter tried to move, the sound of his footsteps would carry to the wild animals. They could hear the approach of man and retired into their shelters, in the deepest reaches of the thickets.

No, it was not easy for a hunter to bag a cautious animal. Everything in the forest, from a twig crackling beneath a hunter's foot to the quietly trembling earth, warns the wild animals of danger. The entire forest comes to their aid: it covers them with thick, dense bushes, noisy foliage, screens them with tree trunks. Even the very colors of nature help the animals to

blend themselves in, to conceal themselves from an alien, evil eye. It was difficult for man to snatch a wild animal from this protection of the forest. And so the age-old duel between the hunter and the forest went on: who would conquer whom?

"Why then, with all this reliable protection offered by the forest, did wild creatures still perish from human hands?" Zhakyp often asked himself. Even now he was meditating on this. "A wild animal's hearing is much keener than a man's, and its eyes much more sharp-sighted, and its sense of smell is miraculous. Sensing danger, it could take refuge in a sheltered spot, and lie there and hide. But no—something draws it to take a look at man. But what? And why is it so trusting? Trust... That's what destroys a wild animal more often than not. That and maternal concern over offspring. An animal will often risk its own life to draw the hunter's attention to itself in order to save its young..."

Zhakyp remembered how the previous autumn he had come across a brood of partridges. The young chicks immediately scattered like dry peas in different directions. But the mother partridge had jumped almost at Zhakyp's feet until her fledglings had made off into the bushes. Her wings dragged along the ground as if they had been broken. Zhakyp knew full well that the partridge is a cautious bird, and that it was no easy matter to get close enough to take a shot at it. And out of curiosity he began observing what she would do next. Turning sharply, Zhakyp headed deliberately towards the bush under which a few of the chicks were hidden. Clucking anxiously, the partridge

flew up a bit above the ground and struck her chest full force against the top of his boot. She fell lifeless onto the ground, both wings outspread. With her whole being she said: here, take me, only don't touch my children. Zhakyp was about to bend down and stretch out his hand, but in that instant the bird jumped aside. Zhakyp stepped involuntarily towards her. But the partridge once again repeated her quick, clumsy jump. Suddenly Zhakyp felt sorry for the partridge and her chicks. So that was what maternal instinct meant! The bird was prepared to face death in order to save its young. "All right, you can live," he had said quietly to the partridge and turned back.

He was already near the lower swamp. The thick grass in the woods reached almost to Zhakyp's waist. His pants were soaked through from the abundant dew, and prickly shivers crept over his body.

The early morning fog melted gradually away. Patches of light shone in the glades. Finally the woods gave way to a large green clearing. This was the lower swamp, where he hoped the roe deer would come to graze.

Zhakyp selected a branchy tree at the edge of the clearing. He climbed up and settled down as comfortably as possible on a fork in the branches and with his double-barrel cocked, began waiting for the appearance of the roe deer.

Sitting in the tree was uncomfortable, and Zhakyp's legs soon became numb. But he endured the discomfort and sat perfectly still in order not to give

away his presence.

Listening to the rustle of the forest, peering intently at the motionless bushes, Zhakyp tried to guess where the deer could be now. And immediately, as clearly as if he were actually seeing them, he had a vision of them lying peacefully in a distant thicket: an antlered male leader, a she-deer, and two small fawns. All were a vivid reddish color with white spots on their sides. They lay there, chewing their endless cud. Zhakyp imagined himself there beside them. Now he was tweaking their ears, patting them lightly on their backs, raising them up from the ground. He tried to urge them, hasten them on! Zhakyp unbuckled his belt, tossed it around the antlers of the roebuck and let it out of the thicket towards his spot in the clearing. The other deer also raised themselves up and followed unwillingly behind...

And suddenly... The branches of a thick nut tree quivered, and from exactly the same spot from which Zhakyp in his imagination had just led the roebuck by his belt, a fiery red deer came out unhurriedly onto the clearing, proudly holding its beautiful antlered head. It was exactly the same as the one which Zhakyp had envisioned.

Emerging from the woods, the roebuck stopped, tossing its head lightly and looking around to see if there was any danger. Then it sucked in the fresh, autumn air with its widely distended nostrils.

It tossed its head again, this time somewhat more vigorously, and from the bushes behind it, sniffing timidly and pricking their sharp ears, appeared a she-deer and two young fawns. Stepping carefully on

their slender, exquisitely shaped legs, they all walked out onto the clearing.

Overwhelmed by the utterly unexpected way the free flight of his imagination had coincided with reality, Zhakyp forgot completely about his rifle and began admiring the little herd of roe deer.

"How beautiful they are! " he almost exclaimed out loud.

It was the first time Zhakyp had ever been able to examine these cautious animals so calmly and at such close range.

But the deer nibbled on the grass, not sensing any danger. They grazed in turn: while two lowered their heads towards the grass, the others kept a sharp watch all around.

"Just like border guards! " Zhakyp thought in astonishment, remembering his service in the army. "And whoever taught them to maintain such a wise vigilance?! "

And then Zhakyp noticed that the barrel of his rifle was aimed directly at the leader's chest. The distance was not great and the aim would be true. Press the trigger and then immediately train the barrel on the female, and a second bullet could bring her down as well. He had never yet encountered such rare good fortune. Hunter's luck was placing itself right in his hands.

But suddenly Zhakyp felt disconcerted. Now he would shoot, and this handsome creature would crash heavily to the ground, flail convulsively in a pool of blood, and its large, moist black eyes would be dimmed with death...

Meanwhile the leader had ceased chewing and froze, staring at the fork in the branches where Zhakyp was perched. The roebuck was so close that Zhakyp could clearly see the withered stalks of grass entangled in its branching antlers.

"Now they'll disappear," he thought with anguish.

But the leader calmly lowered his head and continued nibbling the grass. Zhakyp could have sworn that the leader had seen him. So why didn't he dart off, run away, taking his family with him? How could he have failed to perceive Zhakyp as an enemy?

"Well, go ahead and shoot! " Zhakyp urged himself, but it was as if his finger had turned to stone on the trigger, and he was powerless to make it move. "No! To shoot at such beauty..."

Suddenly the shrill chatter of a magpie ripped through the silence. And in the same instant all four deer just vanished into thin air. Only the fading, staccato pounding of hooves indicated the path of the small herd, now hidden in the forest thicket.

Zhakyp was furious both with himself and the magpie. He glanced up at the treetop where the garrulous bird was still perched and shot at it.

"That's it! There's nothing more for me to do here on this clearing," Zhakyp thought ruefully. "The deer will never come back here."

He jumped down, threw his rifle over his shoulder and began trudging slowly through the woods. No one in the *ail* would believe that he had been within a dozen steps of roe deer and had not fired a shot. That they would not believe him was putting it mildly! They would laugh him out of the camp... Just think of

it--someone of his name and reputation doing such a thing! He had gone soft, lost his head in admiration, and had let such a rare opportunity slip by. What had come over him all of a sudden? He was a fool, plain and simple! There was no other word for it.

Zhakyp quickened his pace as he drew near the *ail*: if only he could make it back to his yurta without running into anybody. It would be the first time in his life that he hadn't observed the old Kirghiz custom of sharing his bag with the first person he met on his way home.

That evening, walking home from work, Zhakyp was pensive and quiet. He took no part in the conversation with his comrades, did not respond to their jokes.

"What's the matter?" his neighbor Osmon asked, poking him in the side. "You haven't said a word the whole day. Sad about something. Hunting bad?.." But suddenly he fell silent and bent down to the ground. "Take a look! Roe deer! "

Everyone squatted down and began examining the fresh tracks intersecting the path.

"Four deer passed by here: two adults and two fawns... And quite recently," someone sighed.

"If a hunter waits long enough, the animal will come to him," Osmon laughed. "Zhakyp, you're the one who's been bragging about bagging a roe deer. And here they are right next to *ail*."

Zhakyp remained silent.

"Listen, my friend, you're just not yourself... Maybe you're losing your touch?"

But as before, Zhakyp did not respond. He thought

of that morning, and his strange indecisiveness. And once again he was overcome with burning rage and vexation.

"I'll go! " he decided firmly. "And I won't be Zhakyp-Mergen if I don't track them down! "

Zhakyp did not even take time for supper. He grabbed his rifle and headed immediately to the spot where the deer's tracks intersected the path. There they were! Cloven hooves splayed broadly to either side. These were the tracks of the leader, calmly and unhurriedly leading his family. The tracks of the female followed, and further behind were the tracks of the two young fawns.

The tracks led to Char-Uya, the rooks' nesting ground. All summer long the air resounded with an unimaginable din. And for that reason hunters never went there. Who could hunt when they were surrounded by these raucous birds?

Now an unusual silence reigned in Char-Uya. The rooks had already flown away, and only the black, tattered baskets of their nests rocked in the wind, reminders of the past, noisy summer.

The deer tracks skirted around Char-Uya and led into dense thickets. Here the sea buckthorn bushes were so tightly intertwined that it was a wonder the deer had been able to make their way through. In some spots he was forced to crawl on hands and knees, and in others, flat on his belly. But this did not stop Zhakyp. Trying not to make noise, he pushed onward.

Presently Zhakyp came across fresh, still warm drop-

pings. That meant the deer were somewhere nearby.

"Bau-u! Bau-u! " the menacing cry of the male leader rang out. The cry was so unexpected that Zhakyp even shuddered. It seemed that the leader had cried out right above his head. Zhakyp held his breath and froze. He knew that roe deer cried in this way when they sensed someone's approach. They feel out and test their still invisible enemy to see if he will take fright. If he doesn't take to his heels, then they themselves must take flight.

The cry was repeated. Zhakyp stood motionless as before. Finally he heard the leader stamp his hoof, which meant that there was no danger and they could graze in peace.

Zhakyp turned his head cautiously, and through the bushes saw a small clearing, very close by. Looking intently, he made out the red roe deer through the crimson-yellow foliage.

The leader stood closest to him. Tossing back his antlers and turning his broad chest, he stood proudly and majestically, staring calmly at Zhakyp. In his eyes there was no fear; only curiosity. It seemed to Zhakyp that the leader had recognized him. And so they stood for some time opposite one another—animal and man—and looked into each other's eyes.

"Don't run away! " Zhakyp entreated with his glance. "Don't run! I won't cause you harm. You don't believe me? Look, I'll put my rifle aside..." And without taking his eyes off the roebuck, Zhakyp carefully propped his double-barrel against the trunk of a tree. The leader did not budge. Then Zhakyp took a step towards him. As before, the roebuck did not

run. He only lowered his head somewhat and threateningly displayed his antlers. Zhakyp took another step. Now it seemed that the leader was looking at him reproachfully. Another step, and yet another... Suddenly he whisked his tail up, and the young deer instantly vanished from the glade. The leader himself remained for a split second longer, as if saying to Zhakyp: "I trusted you, a man. Remember this. And—thank you! "

And then he disappeared into the woods to join his family.

Zhakyp cursed himself the whole way home: "What is happening to me? I just can't bring myself to shoot the deer, and that's it! Just what the devil kind of hunter can I call myself? What spell have they cast on me?"

He thought of the leader's trusting, moist black eyes. "He didn't run away because he recognized me. Yes, that's probably it..." Zhakyp wanted to believe this badly.

He knew that it was impossible to tame a roe deer, that man would never subjugate these free, wild creatures, worthy matches for a hunter, and which fought with such daring to preserve their freedom.

"But then how was primitive man able to tame, let's say, the buffalo, or the wild horse?" Zhakyp wondered. "He probably didn't frighten them, or strike them, and gradually won their trust. Yes, through trust... After all, all our domestic animals were wild at one time. And now man looks after them, gives them food and water to drink, breeds them... But no one of the

domestic animals can approach these deer with their proud, majestic air which sets your heart pounding.

Arriving at the *ail*, Zhakyp affectionately patted his dog Uchar, who had come running at full speed to meet him. But after sniffing her master, she walked away disgruntled—again without a catch!

At dawn Zhakyp heard the anxious cry of a roe deer not far from the *ail*. He listened intently—wasn't it the cry of the leader? But then he immediately dismissed the idea: after all, there were more than just a few deer living in the woods. But he was unable to go back to sleep. For some reason he kept imagining that the same roebuck was calling him to his aid.

"What kind of nonsense is this for a grown man?" Zhakyp tried to reassure himself. "Would a wild proud creature such as this actually become attached to a man? Actually ask for his help?"

Zhakyp pulled the blanket up over his head and squeezed his eyes tightly shut. But then he immediately jumped up decisively: "No! It's a cry for help! I'm going to them. Maybe they need me. They trust me..."

Stepping out of the yurta, he let out a cry of astonishment: everything around was white with the first hoarfrost, and every branch, every blade of grass glistened.

As always Uchar lay curled up at the threshold. She raised her head and stared indifferently at her master as if to say: I'm not going along with you, because you'll just come back empty-handed—and then she

dropped her head back down.

It was brighter than usually in the woods. Zhakyp walked for a long time in the direction from which he had heard the deer's alarming cry at dawn, looking for tracks. But a whole hour passed before he finally found them. Yes, they were the tracks of his deer. But why were they so uncertain? The sharp edges of the hooves had plunged deep into the earth and sent it scattering in all directions. Aha, so the deer had taken flight from someone. But from whom? Ah, yes! Nearby extended the tracks of heavy boots with worn-down heels. Now Zhakyp understood everything. With trembling hands he adjusted the rifle on his back, squatted down and began to intently examine the tracks. The woods did not accept the persecutor, and where it could, placed in his path dense thickets of tangled bushes, and windfallen branches, but he did not give up his pursuit.

Zhakyp ran along following the tracks. Suddenly they diverged sharply in different directions. The roebuck had turned towards the river, and the heavy boots had followed in pursuit. But the tracks of the female and the fawns stretched off into the depths of the woods.

"He's leading him away! What a fine move! " Zhakyp thought suddenly. "He's diverting him from his family..."

The tracks of the leader burst out to an open glade.

"What's he doing! What's he doing! " Zhakyp moaned in despair. "Here even a young child couldn't miss him! To take such a risk! .."

And then, just as he expected, he saw the crimson

drops of blood on the hoarfrost-covered grass, as if someone had scattered generous handfuls of ripe cranberries. The track of the deer's right hind leg became immediately uneven. Zhakyp knew that although the wound was not fatal, it was by no means light—how much suffering it would cause the wild creature!

"I hope your arm withers and drops off, miserable hunter! To take such a shot! .." Zhakyp swore in a fit of anger.

He ran with all his might, as if he still might help the leader, save him from a slow, agonizing death.

The bloody tracks extended to the steep bank of the river, as if the deer had decided, if this was the way it was to be, he would take his last breath beneath the open sky.

Jumping out onto the slope above the river, Zhakyp halted, breathing heavily. His hands fell lifelessly to his sides. It was over! Once again he saw that which he had known he would see. A flock of noisy crows swarmed upon a broad patch of blood. The grass all around was crushed and trampled by the heavy boots.

Frightened by the unexpected appearance of a man, the crows flew off in different directions and settled down in the nearby trees, observing the intruder who was interfering with their feast.

But Zhakyp just stood staring dully at the crimson, slowly freezing patch of blood, and for the first time, he thought of hunting as a perfidious act of murder. How many times, filled with excitement, had he done this very thing and never stopped to think of how cruel and terrible it was. But now...

He descended to the river, and, ripping open the col-

lar of his jacket, bent over and splashed his flushed face a few times with the icy water. Looking around, Zhakyp saw the traces of the unequal battle between the deer and the man. The edge of the bank was totally ravaged: it appeared the leader had not easily surrendered his life.

Zhakyp imagined everything that had been played out here several hours ago. The leader had rushed headlong into the shallow river, hoping to escape his pursuer by crossing to the other bank, but he had slipped on a loose rock, and the hunter in the heavy boots had caught up with him. Then the leader had gone rushing back. Helplessly dragging his wounded leg, he tried to make his way out onto the steep bank. Clumps of earth caved in beneath him. By this time the hunter struck him several times with the butt-end of his rifle: an empty cartridge had probably gotten jambed in the chamber. Still, the leader managed to jump out onto the bank. No, he did not surrender without a fight! Once again on solid ground, he had sharply turned his antlers towards his enemy. Blood gushed from his wound, and with it flowed his last strength. The hunter managed to bring him down, and slashed his throat with a knife. The leader had thrashed wildly for a long time, spraying blood in all directions, and then had fallen still...

"May you be thrice accursed... Such a cruel hunt! " Zhakyp exclaimed.

Now he noticed other tracks—the she-deer and the two fawns had come to the spot of their leader's death and had sorrowfully circled around, unable to bring themselves to leave alone. But the tracks then stretched

to the river, disappeared, and showed up once more on the other bank.

"What can I do? How can I at least help those two fawns?" Zhakyp did not know what exactly his guilt was, but he felt himself guilty before the animals. He made his way to the other side of the river. He looked around. On the bank he had just left, the crows had once again descended onto the bloody spot.

"And they're called guardians of the wild creatures," Zhakyp thought bitterly. He pulled the rifle off his shoulder and fired. The crows went flying helter-skelter.

And then, just as he had once before, the leader appeared clearly and distinctly before Zhakyp's eyes. He lay there, where the crows had just been fussing about. His fiery red coat was covered thickly with blood. A broad, rounded back in a grey quilted jacket was bent over him. The blade of a knife gleamed in the man's hand.

Suddenly the leader raised his magnificent antlered head, and casting a long, sorrowful glance at Zhakyp, said:

"If not for you, I would never have let a man with a rifle come so close to my family. You're the one who taught me to trust. Why? So that another would slay me? Could you really have wanted that?.."

Zhakyp turned away sharply.

The tracks of the orphaned deer stretched upwards along the hillside. And the first tracks imprinted upon the hoarfrost-covered grass were not those of the mother deer, but of a small fawn. The new leader.

Giddy-Up Girl*

The first was Sadokha. She wasn't ours though—as newly returned refugees we'd yet to buy our own horse. She'd come with one of our kissing cousins from the next village to do some ploughing for us. He, the cousin that is, called my father uncle and was himself called Uncle Stepan.

Sadokha was big and white, like the elephant in my story-book, bigger than any horse I'd ever seen before. Or perhaps it only seemed that way, she being the first I'd ever got so close to, the first I was ever, with Uncle Stepan's help, to mount.

When they worked our lot, she huffed and puffed and I watched, fascinated by the sight of her, my

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Uncle Stepan and the earth left fresh and black in the blade's wake.

But the second was ours. Roan he was, from Siberia by way of the First World War. Between the shafts he looked so miserable your heart bled to unharness him right then and there. But when you did, he'd kick up his heels and bolt, or worse yet, go for a snorting roll in the snow or the new-turned furrows.

To the village where we'd often go visiting it was a good seventeen versts, through two more villages with kinfolk. Roan knew we went calling in each, he even knew which gates to turn into. Having slogged his way to the first, he'd veer off the lane straight for our kinsman's yard, as if we'd been heading there all along. A tug on the reins pulled him up with a "and just where do you think you're going?", while the "we'll stop off on the way back, old boy" was the sweet talk of reason. And so, tossing his head, Roan would slog on. Come the second village, three versts down the road, he'd fetch up in the yard of the next cousin only to be jerked rudely back again, with the odd flick of the whip for good measure. At this point, he'd add a sigh to the tossing of his head and I'll bet he even swore under his breath, old soldier that he was. Might as well face it now, the longest haul lay ahead.

The third was a brute with a streaming black mane—Mashka, the orneriest mare there ever was, palmed off as such, I'm sure, on my poor, by then widowed mother. If Mashka weren't in the mood for it there wasn't a soul as dared set foot in the barn. They'd have to drive her out with a whip, hanging from the rafters while she reared sometimes and lashed out at others, if

not with her teeth, then with her hooves. More than anything else she loathed women. Not always, just every now and then, on her off days. For there were long spells when she was as good as gold. Especially when carrying.

She had to be taken out every day then, and this was more often than not my after-school chore. My mother was afraid for me at first, but once my big brother had plunked the "big little Cossack" in place and I was ready to set off, she said:

"No old dog never nips a lil 'un. And she won't neither, you'll see."

One of our outings was no pleasure jaunt—we were sent to my aunt's in the next village to pick up "a mess of wool". Once there I stayed put in the saddle while my aunt brought out a small bundle, gave it to my uncle and my uncle passed it on to me. Perched so high I found it funny that my aunt, knowing Mashka, should keep a respectful distance.

My new-found sense of superiority did not end there. Nor was I content to yodel, loud, on the deserted rutted road, to think myself a knight from my story-books, a knight smitten, no less, by the fair Sonya from the next desk. I put my bundle on Mashka's broad croup and laid my head to rest. In the next instant, Mashka reared, sent me and my erstwhile pillow separately splat but intact into the muddy snow and thundered off at a by no means motherly gallop.

They came out looking for me, my frightened brother and my mother in panting pursuit. Needless to say, I did not give them the whole story.

But that's not what I had in mind.

Earlier that same winter Mashka had surprised us all with her intelligence. My brother had gone into the forest and bought a cord of firewood. As it was too much to cart home in a single trip, he planned to go back the day after next. In those days, you see, it was a long haul indeed. Something, apparently something more than the whispers in the lamplight, woke me up that night. I heard Mikola come in and ask:

"Ma, maybe I'd best not go? It's coming down something fierce. You can't see sweet nothing."

I suppose it's because I'm now middle-aged and my brother died before his time that I feel, as I write these words, a fatherly kind of pity, though he was then but seven years older than me...

The blizzard raged an entire week before it let my brother go. He set out, our big little man of the house, moaning that the stack was buried so deep he'd never, but never find it. Not to worry, my mother reassured him, the old mare would lead him to it.

And so she did.

I can see it all now: Mikola flushed, boisterous and beside himself, telling the dozenth neighbour come to chew the fat all about how Mashka went straight up to the woodpile. Just waded, up to her belly in snow, through an untouched field, straight up to where there weren't a sign of nothing and froze. Dig it up, it's all yours.

...It's funny, sadly funny, where and how it came back to me. Close to half a century later, it was, in a foreign archive and an even more foreign book, where I happened upon the following:

"Captured horses can be most useful in tracking

down partisans. Recent cases have shown them to be infallible guides to long-sought underground camps."

I quote from a Combat Report signed by one Sergeant-Major Schreede of the 283rd Punitive Division, reproduced in a weighty volume on the history of the Soviet partisan war, a splendid edition put out some five years ago in Göttingen.

I did not, on the spot, recall the huge white and good old Sadokha, or Roan, the sly veteran of the First World War, or even our smart but skittish beauty Mashka.

What did come instantly to mind was the open window of our cottage and in it the head of little Dun-Girl, the gentle neighing of a foal.

"Ah my pet, my little cherub, and here I went and plumb forgot all about you."

It's my mother speaking. That morning she had in fact neglected to pour a bowl of fresh milk and tell me:

"Take it out to the little lamb."

Spindle-shanked and dun-coloured, the filly took after her sire, not her dam. "You can go steeplechasing on the likes of her! Man of the house, my foot! You just had to pick that fancy stud." While my mother scolded and teased him in turn, she never once forgot the fresh milk. Three times a day. Straight from the cow and still frothy. Dun-Girl got to prancing into the door or right the way into the kitchen for it.

Not today though. With the doors shut, she had to bray her indignation in the window.

I came in for a scolding too, I who swore I loved the little thing but stuck my nose in a book and didn't

give her another thought. Naturally I took the bowl and went out into the yard. As our best beloved lowered her pink muzzle into the sweet whiteness, it was all I could do not to beg her forgiveness—the milk was cold.

But I'm not done yet.

We'd retreated for the Kashub village not at night, when we should have, but well after first light.

Which is when the spotter spotted us...

We, meaning the last of our marine platoon. The spotter was German. The time—September nineteen thirty-nine, on the Polish coast.

We were famished. We threw ourselves on the first edible thing we saw, the apple-trees in a rain-drenched orchard.

Their artillery, however, was raring to go...

The first shot ripped into the field some way off from the orchard. The second moved in and to the right. The third caught me by the long brick wall. I didn't have time to hit the dirt. Just hid my face in my hands and flung myself back against the wall.

But first thing I saw when the lights came up again, was a vision from my childhood loping, sidling towards me, a huge white mare, a plodder from another home, some other little boy's Sadokha, running mute, head bobbing, blood gushing from a shot-off muzzle.

Giddy-up girl, ...oh my little girl.

I'd brought my own mount with me when joined the partisans. Chestnut, the son of the dun filly fed on fresh milk, the grandson of the wayward Mashka, fine-boned like his mother before him. But runty. So runty that Petrenko, a great jokester, would holler to me

from up front on my first scouting mission:

"Mind the ant-hills! Get them long legs up! "

And he laughed in the dark, like the kind-hearted wag he was.

One week later he was killed. I inherited his charger. Chestnut went to a shorter comrade in my platoon.

Giddy-up girl, or boy, you and all your nameless legion, but please, don't tell me you outlived your rider only to lead the enemy to our parents and children? You, in all your innocence?

Keekeek*

A Nivkh Tale

They say that at one time swans were mute birds. Now everyone knows that they cry "kee-kee, kee-kee", which is why they are called "keekeek".

What made the swans break their silence?

In a nomad camp on the shore of a bay there lived a little girl. She loved to play on the smooth, sandy spit: from morning to evening she would trace out different patterns with a small twig, build tiny houses of sand.

She also spent long hours admiring the beautiful birds which, like silent white clouds, floated over her camp. The little girl would lie down on the warm sand

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and follow the flock with her eyes until they had disappeared into the distance.

The girl's parents loved their daughter very much. But one summer day the little girl's mother died. Father and daughter grieved deeply. When a month had passed, the girl's father set out to a distant camp to find a new mother for his little daughter.

Father brought back a beautiful woman with dark, finely shaped brows and lashes, like the fluffy tufts on the tips of the ears of the winter squirrel, and thick braids, like the tail of the black-brown fox.

The stepmother looked the girl up and down and said nothing.

The next day the father set out to hunt. The little girl rose at sunrise and went out to the shore of the bay to play in the waves. She played for a long time, and when the sun had risen high above the forest, she ran home to eat breakfast. She stepped into the house and saw that her stepmother was still asleep. The little girl sighed quietly, returned to the shore and began to play once again.

Right at the water's edge she built a little house of sand. A wave came up and washed it away. But when the wave had retreated, she managed to build a new house. And so she played, not even noticing that it was already midday. When the sun began to beat down on her head she suddenly realized that she still hadn't eaten and ran home.

The stepmother was still sleeping. Finally she got up, brought from the barn a tender, white piece of sun-dried fish and began to eat. She did not even take notice of the little girl standing nearby.

The stepmother chewed up the last piece of fish, licked off her greasy fingers and, without even glancing at the girl, tossed her the tail of a dried salmon. The girl ate the salmon tail. And then she felt more hungry than ever. The stepmother yawned, turned away and once again went back to bed.

And so the little girl's days grew bitter and clouded.

Her father caught much fish and wild game. He would only come home to bring back his catch, and then would leave once again for the taiga. All the tasty pieces the stepmother ate up herself.

Once the father asked his wife:

"My wife, for some reason our daughter has grown extremely thin. Maybe she's sick?"

The woman replied:

"No, she's healthy. She's already grown, but she does none of the housework; she doesn't help me at all. She spends all her days running around! She's lazy. She'll be thin no matter how much you feed her, because she runs around so much! "

One autumn evening, when the birds were flying in big flocks towards the midday sun, the father returned from his hunting and lay down to rest. The stepmother brought out a greasy dried fish and began to cut it up into thin slices. The girl had not eaten since morning. She walked over to the table and began asking her stepmother for something to eat. The stepmother remained silent, as if she didn't even see the girl.

"Give me something to eat! " the little girl asked.

"Get away from the table! " was the answer.

"Give me something to eat! " the little girl asked again.

"Get away! " was the answer.

The little girl's belly was pinched with hunger. Hunger gnawed at her so that she stretched out her hand for a rosy-coloured piece of fish. When her hand touched upon the fish, the stepmother struck it with a sharp knife. The ends of the girl's fingers were left on the table. The little girl ran out to a warm, sandy knoll and began sobbing loudly. Blood flowed in streams from her fingers. The little girl sobbed:

"Kee-kee, kee-kee! "

At this time the swans were flying above the bay. They heard the little girl's sobs and made a circle in the air. Then they landed beside her, surrounded her, and began to examine her. When they noticed the blood streaming from her fingers, they felt a great surge of pity for the poor little girl. Their pity was so great that tears welled up in their eyes. The swans wept soundlessly. Their tears fell like dewdrops onto the sand. And where the swans sat the sand became wet from their tears. The great white birds wept harder and harder, and suddenly their voices broke free:

"Kee-kee, kee-kee, kee-kee! "

Hearing their cries, the girl's father walked out of the house and, seeing that the swans had surrounded his daughter, ran to get his bow and arrow: he wanted to kill the large birds.

The swans flapped their wings. And at that instant wings grew out from the little girl's shoulders—she had turned into a slender swan.

When the hunter came running back out of the house, the flock of swans had already ascended into the heavens. In the very center of the flock flew a

young bird.

All the swans cried:

"Kee-kee, kee-kee, kee-kee! "

Only the young bird was silent.

The hunter clutched at his head, cried out after the retreating flock:

"Daughter! Come back! From now on everything will be different! "

But in answer he heard only:

"Kee-kee, kee-kee, kee-kee! "

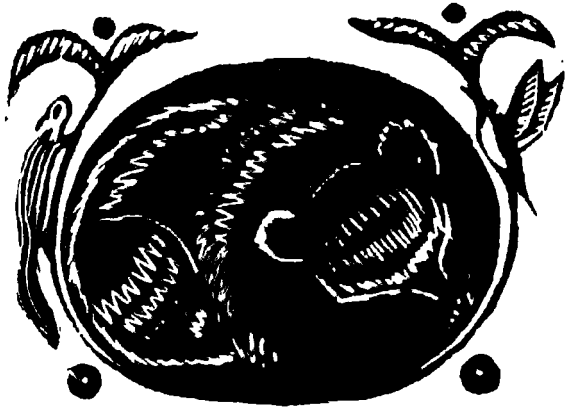
The father stood hunched over for a long time beside the house and gazed sorrowfully after the departing flock. Now the swans hung like beads over the sea. Soon they melted into the azure distance.

Every spring the swans would fly over the nomad camp by the bay. And they would cry loudly: "Kee-kee, kee-kee, kee-kee! " Only one bird was silent. And every time the swans flew over the camp, they could see far below the figure of a man standing alone on a knoll.

Since then much time has passed. And on the spot where once there stood the solitary man, there grew a sturdy larch. Neither fog nor wind can topple it down. And it stands, bending to the south, its branches like arms upraised towards the heaven. And the swans, flying past from north to south, south to north, never fail to cry:

"Kee-kee, kee-kee, kee-kee! "

Vladimir Sanghi



The Chipmunk, the Nutcracker and the Bear*

A Nivkh Tale

On some bright summer's day make a point of getting up earlier than usual. Go out to the forest, and walk carefully around its edge. On the topmost branch of an old alder you will see a chipmunk—a small forest creature. Its fluffy tail is arched back like a squirrel's, and in its paws is a pine cone. The chipmunk will make short work of its cone, scuttle along the branch, and call out with a chirrup. The chipmunk's good friend, the nutcracker—a small bird of the forest—will fly over

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and bring it a cone in its long beak, and then fly off for another.

While the chipmunk is occupied with the cone, walk over closer. Only step lightly. And you will make out five black stripes on the chipmunk's red back.

At one time the chipmunk was entirely red. And he lived alone. All the other forest creatures bullied him around. The ermine and the fox even wanted to eat him.

The chipmunk endured all the abuse until one day he decided: I will find myself a friend who is big and strong. One whom all the others, even the fox and the ermine, will fear.

And the chipmunk set out into the forest in search of a friend. He hopped from tree to tree, bush to bush. He scampered along fallen branches, peered into crevices.

And suddenly the chipmunk spied a bear. The bear was sleeping in the shade beneath a dwarf pine bush.

The chipmunk grabbed the bear's ear and began tugging at it. Somehow he managed to wake him up. The bear thundered out crossly:

"What do you want?"

The chipmunk said:

"Bear, oh bear! Let's be friends."

The bear yawned lazily:

"But why should we be friends?"

"Together we'll be better off. You're big and clumsy. But I'm small and nimble. I'll watch over you while you sleep, warn you of approaching danger."

"But I don't fear anyone," the bear said.

"Then we'll gather nuts together."

The bear raised his big head and stared at the chipmunk:

"Nuts, you say?.."

"Yes, nuts. And we'll gather berries together."

"Berries, you say?.."

"Yes, berries. And we'll catch ants together."

"And ants, you say?.." The bear sat up. "Nuts and berries and ants, you say?"

"Yes, nuts and berries and ants."

The bear was pleased. He replied: "Then I'm willing to be friends with you."

The chipmunk had found himself a friend. A big, powerful friend. Now he did not have to fear anyone in the forest.

The nimble chipmunk found lush berry patches and dwarf Siberian pine bushes packed with cones. The bear knew only one thing, and that was eating.

Soon the bear grew so fat that it was difficult for him to get around. Now he spent most of his time lying down. And only from time to time would he command:

"Hey, chipmunk, bring me some whortleberries."

Or:

"Hey, chipmunk, scratch my back."

Autumn rolled around. The long, cold winter lay ahead.

The chipmunk began to grow anxious:

"Listen, bear, soon it will be winter. We have to put by some provisions."

The bear replied: "You make the provisions." And

he himself just lay there as before.

And so the chipmunk stored away food for the winter.

The bear climbed into his den, propped a paw beneath his head and went to sleep. The chipmunk felt uncomfortable in the spacious den.

The bear slept one month, two months—and then he awoke. He said to the chipmunk:

"Bring me some nuts, friend."

The chipmunk fed the bear. With his belly full, the bear fell off to sleep once again.

The bear awoke as winter was drawing to an end. And once again he said to the chipmunk: "Bring me some berries and some nuts."

The bear gobbled up all the provisions and then went back to sleep. He did not leave the chipmunk a single nut or berry. Barely alive, the chipmunk hung on until spring.

When the snow had melted, the bear woke up. He stretched luxuriously and said to the chipmunk: "Well, little brother, we made it through the winter just fine! "

Then he praised the chipmunk: "And you, little friend, are a real trump! " And he stroked his paw along the chipmunk's back. And so there remained on the chipmunk's red back five black stripes—traces of the bear's gesture of friendship.

The bear climbed out of his den and forgot immediately about his small friend—there were succulent roots all around, and the bear did nothing but dig them up with his powerful paw. The sound of his noisy, delighted champing could be heard all through the forest.

The chipmunk had barely enough strength left to climb out of the den. He lay for a long time on the dry grass, with his striped back towards the sun.

Just then a nutcracker flew by. She had also spent the winter in the forest. And she had had a hard time of it: the snow had covered the nuts and the nutcracker did not know how to set by provisions.

The taiga bird was carrying a pine cone in her beak that she had found somewhere.

The nutcracker spied the chipmunk and took pity on him. She gave him the pine cone, even though she was hungry herself.

The chipmunk ate a pine nut—and he felt his neck grow strong. He ate a second—and his back grew strong. He ate a third—and his legs grew strong. He ate the entire cone—and he felt that he could walk. The chipmunk set out through the forest. He hopped from tree to tree, bush to bush. He peered beneath snags and fallen branches, into crevices and burrows. He found last year's nuts. He ate them himself and shared them with the nutcracker.

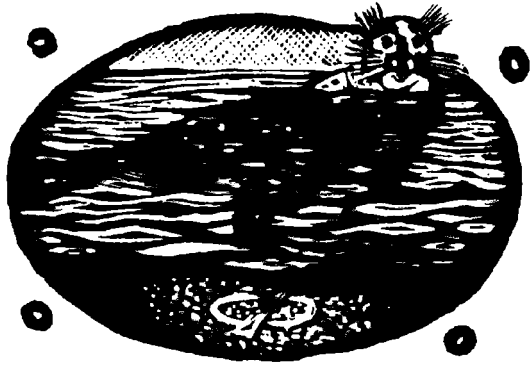
From that time on a friendship formed between the small chipmunk and the tiny nutcracker.

Every autumn, when the nuts ripen, the nutcracker flies through the forest and gathers pine cones. And the chipmunk shells them and stores them up for himself and the nutcracker.

The ermine and the fox got word that the chipmunk was no longer friends with the bear, and they rejoiced. They decided to eat him. But things didn't work out as they planned. No matter how stealthily the ermine and fox tried to sneak up on the chipmunk, they would be

spotted by the keen-sighted nutcracker. When an enemy attacks the nutcracker, the nimble chipmunk sinks his teeth into its neck. And so together, the nutcracker with her sharp beak and the chipmunk with his teeth, the small friends drive away their enemies.

And now life is not so sweet for the bear. He has no provisions. And so as not to perish from hunger, he does nothing but suck on his paw the whole winter long.



The Seal and the Flounder*

A Nivkh Tale

In the north of Ykh-mif there is a bay, separated from the Sea of Okhotsk by a sandy spit. This is a lagoon. A lagoon like any other: there's a deep channel

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in its basin into which sea water flows during the rising tide, and during ebb tide it pours back out to the sea through a narrow strait; in the lagoon there is also a vast sand bar which stretches to the west from the deep channel, gradually changing into a gently sloping bank. The sand bar is completely overgrown with seaweed.

When you go out to set up nets, don't set them up in the shallow water. Here you'll catch neither calico salmon nor salmon trout. Your nets will be crammed full of seaweed, and in the bottom meshes you'll find nothing but flounder. And not the common, smooth flounder, but one entirely covered with prickly growths which look like warts. This flounder usually lies at the bottom of the lagoon, covered over with mud, and is not visible. And if you look over to where the water is deep, you will see on the surface the black round head of a seal. He spins to the left, to the right, as if looking for someone with his big shiny eyes. The seal searches for a long time, and then dives to the depths of the bay. Soon he appears once again at the surface, turning his head to the left and right.

At one time the flounder looked the same as all the others. And this was not to her liking. And so she swam off in search of someone who could tell her how to be different from the other flounder.

She met up with a navaga:

"Listen, navaga, you have come to our channel from distant waters. You do not even fear the ninth wave. And you have seen much. Tell me, how can I make myself different from the other flounder?"

The worldly navaga was taken aback by the flounder's question and shook its blunt head, wiggled its thin tail and dove into the depths.

But the flounder went to the smelt and to the salmon trout. No one was able to help her.

"I will help to ease your grief," the seal said. "Only you must be sure to help me."

"Of course! Of course! " the delighted flounder exclaimed, and she swam over to the seal and stroked his moustache with her fins.

At that time long ago the seal was all black, and he could be spotted even far away amidst the ice floes. And the seal has many enemies: the bear, the eagle, the fox...

The seal set about rubbing a special clay over the flounder. He worked diligently for a long time. The only sounds were those of his labored breathing as he toiled. On the flounder's tail the seal painted a fan of the northern lights, and her fins he painted the color of a quiet sunset over the August bay.

The flounder could not get enough of admiring herself. She flipped over on one side, then the other, then swam atop a wave, then dove to the very bottom.

The seal waited patiently for the flounder to finally calm down.

"Now you do the same for me," the seal said. "I'm black, and I can be spotted from far away among the ice floes. Make me grey, so I'll be inconspicuous both in the ice and on the shore."

"In a jiffy," the flounder said, and began to cover the seal with white clay.

But the flounder was not as diligent as the seal. Besides, she was in a hurry to get back and show herself

off to her relatives. She rubbed on a few patches of clay and then gave up.

"Oh, I'm so tired," she said.

"Rest for a while," the seal said sympathetically.

But the flounder turned around and began to swim away.

"Where are you going?" the startled seal cried out.

The flounder gave a powerful thrust of her fins, and the only thing the seal could see was her flat back. The seal was horrified: now he was mottled. Now he could hide neither among the ice floes, nor on the shore; in the ice his black spots would give him away, and on the shore, his white spots.

"So that's the way you want to be! " the indignant seal muttered, and began chasing after the flounder. The pursuit lasted for a long time. But it was hopeless: just as the seal would open his mouth to catch the deceiver, she would adroitly dodge aside. Finally the enraged seal grabbed a flipperful of coarse sand and threw it at the flounder. And so the flounder was covered with prickly growths which looked like warts.

Much time has passed since then. But even today the seal is enemies with the flounder. The flounder hides from the menacing seal among the seaweed in the shallow water. She lies on the bottom of the lagoon, covers herself up with mud, and is hidden from view.

But the spotted seal swims deep below, still searching vainly for the flounder, diving to the very bottom and then popping back up on the surface of the bay, turning his head to the left and right...

The Bitter Sting of Truth*

I have already spoken about many things from my childhood and only about this incident have I remained silent. How many times it seemed the words were right on the tip of my tongue—ready to tumble out any second. I spent sleepless nights, agonized, and finally understood that until I opened up, I would have no peace of mind. But then things like this take time. If it had been an easy thing to do, I would have spoken up long ago. Hidden in this incident is my secret. But if I disclose it, it will cease to be a secret, and people will find out something about me which I myself do not wish to recall... Still, today I have decided to rid myself of the burden which for a good quarter of a

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century I have carried in the furthermost recesses of my heart. It became unbearable; my conscience began to demand: go ahead and tell it, what are you hiding it for?! Yes, you cannot hide the truth. No matter how bitter, you must speak up about it. Now I know: people who hide the truth only deceive themselves.

So here it is, this sombre story, which has become a lifelong bitter lesson for me.

But before beginning, I must point out that in those years my father was not the cheerful, witty old man that he is today. Instead, you must picture to yourself a man, tall and thin as a rake, with two deep hollows in place of eyes, eternally frowning and taciturn. My friends in the village, young boys just like I, would even ask: "Why does he always look so mean?" But I knew that my father was not mean at all, but simply rarely laughed or joked. Why he laughed so little is hard to say. It may be that during the post-war years this is the way you were expected to be. Who knows.

Usually, returning towards evening from the field, frowning and weary as always, he would sit down with a deep sigh on a stump by the gate and ask for some whey. While Mother went off to get the whey, he would ask us two or three questions, lecture us tersely and tell us what chores needed to be done. Drinking up his whey, he would get up wordlessly, take his hoe, and head out to the garden. There he would work until dark. Mother had told us many times that this garden was the only thing that kept us on our feet.

At the time I was going on thirteen. I still wasn't adept at handling a hoe, but I helped my parents conscientiously with all the other chores: watered the

garden, fed the cow, carried firewood from the mountains, and once or twice even went to the mill with my younger brother and helped out carrying corn to be ground.

Salim, my younger brother, was in the third grade. He was an honor student, and for that reason he had a swelled head. No matter what our parents would bring us, he would always take the best treat for himself. He would sketch a few slipshod lines and then walk around boasting: I'm going to be an artist! He always had some chalk or a piece of coal in his pocket, and drew pictures all over the rocks alongside the road. Once he even drew a picture of our Alopar on a steep boulder, and from that day on the pup looked at me in mute reproach. And Salim never missed an opportunity to taunt me with this drawing.

All in all Salim wasn't a bad fellow, but still I had no reason to love him. Adults always felt sorry for him, he was so thin and pale, and Mother would try to fatten him up by giving him cream when I wasn't around. Quite often he would walk out of the kitchen licking his lips like a sly cat. But despite all Mother's efforts his neck was so scrawny that it was simply a miracle that it even supported his head. His head was exactly the shape of a long pumpkin. Our uncle would say: one tweak on the nose would finish him off. And it was true: the slightest shove would knock him right off his feet.

Once Salim and I set out for the mountains to gather firewood. It wasn't too far from where we lived, you could make it on foot in one hour's time. Alopar tagged along with us. He was still just a young pup,

only two or three months old or a little more, no one really knew for sure. We had found him in a pit in the collective farmyard, and he had been so covered with dirt that Aunt Gulsum, our neighbor, took him for a little jackal. Mother got upset:

"Where on earth did you dig him up! " She really lit into me. "It's nothing but a common jackal! .."

"Salim's the one who found him, not me. I only climbed down into the pit and brought him out." I always let it be known that Salim had also taken part in things. Who knew how things would turn out? If they were going to deal out punishments, then together we would each get off lighter. And then again, maybe nothing would come of it. They usually forgave Salim: he was weak and always got excellent marks in school.

"What have you done," she continued. "The other jackals will come for him during the night and they'll kill off all the hens! "

The poor animal trembled and looked from one of us to the other in dismay.

Fortunately, Grandfather walked over just then. Squinting, he sized up our acquisition and then pronounced authoritatively:

"It's a pup, an ordinary puppy."

"Hurrah! A puppy! " Salim and I shouted in unison.

Then we argued a bit over who the dog would belong to. And since there appeared no possibility of dividing him up, we agreed he would belong to us both. We always quickly reached an understanding once we saw that there was no other way open except

that of agreement.

Once we had washed the puppy off and cleaned him up, it turned out he was spotted. And so we named him Alopar, which means "Spotted". The poor creature was starving, and instead of feeding him, we had been busy guessing what breed he was and how he could have ended up in the pit where we had found him. Then, suddenly coming to our senses, we brought him some bread and milk, and hastily built him a kennel, spreading straw down on the inside.

From that day on, no matter what we did or where we went, Alopar was our constant companion. He would go scrambling and slipping up the steep slopes and follow us up into the mountains. There, he would sit beside us while we rested, chase right at our heels if we began to race with one another. In short, we were inseparable.

One month passed. Alopar already distinguished between his own people and strangers. Whenever he spotted an unfamiliar person he would yap once or twice without fail. And if the stranger happened to walk into our yard, he would break into a furious barking until we greeted the guest and calmed him down. A bit later he began to distinguish the livestock as well. When the herd returned in the evening, our cow and three nanny goats would always turn off into our yard and head for their different pens. But just let one of them violate the prescribed order or head over towards the grapevine, and Alopar would be right there. And God forbid that a stray goat wander into our yard—Alopar would not calm down until it had been chased out through the gates.

Actually he was rather afraid of the goats, and in his bark there was not so much menace as there was entreaty, as if to say, you know you don't belong here, so why don't you leave. And when our neighbor went away and left his goat with us, the poor dog fretted the whole night long: he seemed to think that this crafty beast had deceitfully wormed its way into our confidences, and that in the wee hours of the night or at dawn, when everyone was sound asleep, would surely get up to some sort of mischief... After that Mother took a real liking to him and began to treat him differently.

In those days there still wasn't any electricity in our village, and the folk there had never even heard of a refrigerator. We had heard stories that in the old days, those who were more well-to-do had a cellar which in the winter they filled with snow and covered over with a layer of earth. And even though the snow would begin to melt in the summer, enough remained so that the cellar could serve as a refrigerator. It seems I've gotten a little off the track. What was I talking about? Ah, yes, I remember. And so, in our village there was neither electricity nor refrigeration. There was no meat store either. Usually, after slaughtering a goat or an old cow, we would sell part of the meat and dry-cure the rest for ourselves. Each night Mother would tie the salted but not completely dried meat up to a pole and set it out in the fresh air.

Once a fair-sized chunk of salted beef fell off and Alopar kept watch over it, chasing away the cats until morning. The minute Mother got up he came tearing over to her and began racing back and forth between

her and the meat, wagging his tail and whining—his way of explaining to her that the meat had fallen. If not for Alopar, the cats would have had a real feast.

Alopar was a smart dog, and I gave him away like an utter fool.

On the one hand, you might say I acted nobly, handing the pup over to the collective-farm shepherd. But on the other... In short, even now this story torments me. And that's why I don't keep a dog, and if someone starts up a conversation about them I immediately think of Alopar, and then I just want to go somewhere and hide from shame.

I already mentioned that once Salim and I set out to the mountains with a hatchet and string to gather firewood. And Alopar went with us. We had already prepared two bundles of brushwood and were getting ready to head back when the collective-farm herd came out from behind a ridge. Two enormous sheep dogs, like bears, came rushing at us with a furious barking. Panic-stricken, we scrambled up onto a juniper-tree, while Alopar, whining from fear, rushed about beneath us. We shouted out for the shepherds to come and help. Fortunately, nothing serious happened. After sniffing the puppy over with their unbelievably huge snouts, the dogs seemed satisfied that there was nothing suspicious about Alopar and began to play with him. But from our perch above, we could see that the poor thing was beyond the point of playing: fear-stricken, he tried to evade the dogs, but they would block his path in two quick bounds.

A shepherd walked over and drove away the dogs, and we climbed down from the tree.

"Someone must have been saying their prayers for you this time. You're lucky that the juniper was nearby." The shepherd was still young and was holding a long staff in his only hand; the other arm he had most likely lost at the front. "They wouldn't have bitten you, but they would have given you the scare of your life."

"They would have bitten us for sure," Salim sobbed out in an aggrieved voice, wiping away his tears.

"They don't bite youngsters. Even a wolf won't touch young children. But if you go asking for trouble, or go running out after a sheep, then, of course..." Here the shepherd noticed our puppy and tried to lure him over: "Here, boy, here."

Sensing that the shepherd was up to no good, Alopar ran further away.

"Call your puppy, let me take a look at him," the shepherd asked. "He looks like he might be a purebred."

I picked up Alopar, but even in my arms he continued to bare his teeth and growl viciously. As if nothing at all were wrong, the one-armed shepherd grabbed him by the scruff of his neck and held him up. Still Alopar managed to tear himself free. Barking furiously, he ran over to Salim for protection, who was standing a distance away.

"Give us the puppy," the shepherd said in a demanding voice, "Let him grow up with our dogs."

"What for? He's happy enough with us."

"No good will come of your pup. A dog should run with a pack; around people it'll just get spoiled... Here, take it..." Suddenly he was stretching out a green fifty-rouble bill. I hadn't even noticed when he pulled

it out of his pocket.

"No, that's all right," I mumbled hastily. The sight of so much money had even started my head spinning. Dumbfounded, I looked over at Salim. He was standing with his mouth half-open in amazement.

"Take it... You'll find yourself another puppy. Surely there are others in the village... But give us this one—he'll guard the collective-farm herd. Well, you're a Young Pioneer,* aren't you! "

"I'll bring you another one..."

But my words somehow sounded unconvincing. I could not tear my gaze away from the brand-new crackly bill and was afraid that the shepherd would change his mind and put the money back in his pocket.

"Here, and take this for your brother." This time he pulled out a red thirty-rouble bill and shoved both bills into my pocket. Now I didn't even attempt to protest. "Hold him a minute while I leash him." The shepherd's commanding voice no longer sounded so insulting.

The one-armed shepherd agilely placed a rope over Alopar's neck and began to drag him away, no longer paying any attention to us. Alopar resisted and whined, begging for our help. I turned to stone; how I wished I were deaf so as not to hear his offended howling. The pup still hadn't lost hope that we would come to his rescue and called and called us, unable to believe in our betrayal. It seemed it would never end... The years have gone by, but even today that ear-piercing howl still rings in my ears.

* Member of the voluntary communist organization of children, named after Lenin.—*Ed.*

But at the time I quickly forgot about Alopar; I was caught up by the money. It seemed to me quite a good deal—eighty whole roubles are nothing to be sneezed at! Neither of us had ever held such a large sum of money in his hands.

Salim and I quickly divided up the money—he took the red bill and I the green, and right then and there we decided what we would purchase with them. I planned to buy fishing hooks, and maybe even a net. Salim at once decided that he would buy some crayons. We talked of nothing else the whole way home.

As we drew near the house our excitement wore off somewhat, and some sort of persistent, creeping anguish began to constrict our unbridled happiness. But we did not even dare speak to one another about this.

"When Papa finds out that you've sold Alopar, you'll be in big trouble," Salim blurted out.

"For what? We gave him up for the collective-farm herd. And the shepherd even said: 'You're Young Pioneers, you should understand...' Just think—someday our Alopar will save the sheep from wolves. Everybody will be talking about it. 'Whose dog is that, where's it from?' they'll start to ask, and then they'll remember us. Then the collective-farm chairman will come to school and present us with gifts before all the others..." Thus I tried to console myself.

"But did you tell the shepherd that the dog didn't just belong to you?"

"What for, he knew anyway—he gave us both money."

"Then why did he stick it in your pocket?" Salim persisted.

"Well, because I was just closer. He even said: 'Take this for your brother.'"

Nevertheless, Salim tried in every way possible to show that we had played different roles in the transaction, and each time it ended up that he had had nothing to do with it. He could have easily told our parents everything right away. But we agreed to keep silent. If they asked where Alopar was, we would say that the shepherd had taken him, but about the money—not a word.

They noticed Alopar's absence in the yard only the second day. Grandmother was the first to sound the alarm; and then Mother came after us. We answered the way we had agreed. Mother grumbled at us a bit, but Father remained totally indifferent: it was too insignificant an event to warrant his attention.

Our fears subsided. These grown-ups are hard to figure out: sometimes they won't let you off for the smallest trifle, but other times they'll let you get away with murder. We most likely got off so lightly because we had the chairman of the collective farm behind us—the pup was needed by the collective farm. At the time the collective farm was a serious matter, not to mention the chairman.

Days passed. Everyone forgot about Alopar. And no one would have even known what had really happened that day in the mountains beneath the juniper-tree. But Salim broke our agreement.

That day they got me ready to go to the mill to grind half a sack of sorghum. Salim was to go out and

pick grass for fodder. After giving him this assignment, Father left for work. Mother helped me to harness the donkey, and I sat down on top of the sack and set out on my way. Salim came running after me, and began begging me to take him along to the mill.

"Leave me alone! " I shouted, brushing him away.

There was nothing I could do, if our parents had ordered him to stay home. And I wasn't about to cater to his whims. But Salim grabbed the donkey's tail and wouldn't let go. "Let go," I said, but he acted as if he didn't hear. I had a switch in my hand. I just barely touched him and he set up a howl. Then he picked up a stone from the ground and threw it right at my head. Blood came gushing down over my face. They carried me back into the house right away, and began to burn a piece of old felt to bandage the wound. Salim ran off somewhere and didn't show up until evening.

Returning from work, Father found out the details of what had happened and went out looking for my brother.

"Salim! .. Eh, Salim! .. Salim! " he called in a loud voice from the roof of the cattle-shed.

After a while Salim showed up with hanging head, his eyes lowered.

"Now you'll get what's coming to you! " I said, not without a gloating malice.

Salim stood submissively before Father.

"Well, speak up! " Father said, losing his patience. "Why did you do it?"

In moments like these we truly feared our father. Although he never beat us, just his menacing appearance alone was enough to knock out of us any desire

for mischief of any kind.

"He ... he sold Alopar... He sold him to a shepherd. He took money for him! " Salim suddenly forced out, swallowing back his tears. My breath was taken away. I had not expected such treachery.

"What?" Father said, not believing his ears.

Salim never managed to finish. Father cut him short with a slap on the face.

"So this is how you've contrived to worm your way out! .."

Salim ran wailing out of the house. Now it was my turn.

"The shepherd ... for the herd ... the collective farm ... said that..." I began mumbling incoherently, but Father did not even bother to listen.

"Get out, you rascal! Only scoundrels sell their friends."

He looked at me in such a way that if the ground beneath me had opened up I would have thrown myself into the abyss just to hide myself from his look. I would rather he had beaten me. In his eyes there was pain and contempt. All my life I have never experienced anything like it. And even now, recalling this, I am trembling all over and can feel goosebumps rising up all over my body.

I had to experience all that in order to understand: baseness, no matter how you paint it up, what lofty motives you use to justify it, remains baseness all the same.

How We Went Hunting for Elk*

We've been traipsing along since sunrise...

It must have been hard for Trakimas to tell us about this.

For him the elk is sacred.

And in general the game warden Trakimas, respectfully called Forest Uncle, devoutly loves the forest and its inhabitants. However, he is known at times to take from the forest and to help others take from it. Without qualms of conscience, without sentimental lamentations.

As soon as the February blizzards begin to howl, he sets out to wage battle with the white hunger. He bends down aspen saplings and thus provides food for the elks, roe deer and hares. His troughs are always full

* English translation © Raduga Publishers 1986

of hay. And he drags potatoes for the wild boars to thickets so remote that no horse would ever make its way through to them. He leaves his sledge at a cutting in the forest, tosses the sack over his back and, puffing and panting, wades chest deep through the fluffy, bluish-white snow...

Sometimes Forest Uncle will turn clever. Every now and then a family of wild boars will have a suspicious stroke of good luck. We spend long hours trying to trace them down, but no boar ever comes within range of our rifles... But we don't get angry at Trakimas. It means that it was just not the right time to take these animals.

Now Forest Uncle says to us: "It looks like we'll have to lick a few elks." He never says "shoot" or "kill". Those words just go against his grain. But "to lick" them is a different matter. Here it's as if you're going out to do battle with a wild animal, one against one.

The game warden Kalnaitis, a big friend of hunters and an excellent hunter himself, has long held that the undergrowth cannot support so many elks. Their numbers have increased greatly. But the warden is younger than Trakimas, and he sees everything in more simple terms. It's easy for him to talk this way. He has his own point of view: the forest means more to him than the animals...

But the warden also counted the broken, gnawed saplings in the pine forests. Too many... Elks are important... But then the pine trees are too. Forest Uncle examined things from every angle, and realized with an aching heart: too many...

That is why we've been traipsing along today since early dawn through the endless forest. We have stretched out single file, trying to follow like wolves in one another's tracks. That way it's easier. And we keep taking turns being the one to lead the way and clear the path for the rest.

The snow is waist-deep. Heavy and wet. And there's a wind blowing. A damp, piercing wind. It penetrates through your sheepskin coat and quilted jacket, freezes your chest, and with your whole body you feel the dank cold of the grey winter's day.

Thin-trunked aspens lash at you with their bare branches. Here and there a dry bough will crack beneath a strong gust of wind, breaking off and falling onto the snow. In the forest there is only the wind and the groaning of the trees. All living things have hidden themselves away: we see neither birds nor hares.

We alone hobble through the snow. Silently, trying to follow in one another's steps, our heads sunken into our shoulders, hats pulled down low. And those who are carrying rifles must take care that their barrels don't get clogged up with snow.

No one even has enough strength to exchange a word with someone or to make a joke. The only sounds are our heavy breathing and the crackling of a branch from time to time.

It's already midday. Just as grey and wan as morning. And the wind keeps picking up force.

We're soaking wet and chilled to the bone. However, we all know that hunting for the elk is not like hunting for hares. We've gone out after the elk, and so we must be patient. And sometimes it happens that you meet

up with them, admire them from a distance, and that's it...

But today we're already fed up with the wind, and the wet, sticky snow, and our lack of success.

Even before dawn, when someone expressed doubt as to whether it would be worhtwhile starting out on such an important venture today, the warden Kalnaitis promised to lead us directly to the elk. And Trakimas, an undisputed authority among the hunters, kept repeating:

"We'll lick them. You'll see, brothers, we'll lick them."

And cars were waiting to bring the elk back to town. And horses were standing ready at the warden's cabin to haul the carcasses out to the road. This was an important hunt.

It's dangerous to wade through snow when you don't know what's underneath it. This year the winter has been a real plague: it dumped snow on the warm earth and just keeps on piling it up. One of the men, in the process of clearing the path ahead, stumbled into a swamp powdered over with snow. The water was over the top of his boots. We have spread out in different directions, trying to feel our way onto more stable ground—and every single one of us has ended up with rusty, swamply slush inside his boots. Our feet are gripped with numbing cold.

If we had set out to hunt hares, we would have cursed everything including the devil himself under our breath long ago, trying to set our backs to the wind. And we would have waited for the first to speak up:

"To the devil with these hares..."

Those would be wonderful words!

We would have stopped and huddled together, lit up cigarettes and expressed our doubts, and someone might have suggested that we give it one more try—flush them out from a different location, from the thicket itself... But then everyone, as if by chance, would have turned back and taken the nearby path leading out of the forest, to the warm cabin of the warden Kalnaitis.

But today the men seem to be frenzied. We plough silently through the wet snow, puffing and panting.

We reach a fir grove where it's more peaceful and cozy. The wind howls through the treetops, but the wet sticky flakes do not penetrate through the thick boughs. Now we're able to catch our breath and shake the snow out of our boot tops and from behind our collars.

The elks seem to have vanished from the face of the earth. Their coats were probably soaked also. They were most likely waiting things out somewhere in the thickets... Maybe Trakimas would say despite everything that the best thing to do would be to turn around and follow our path back while it was still clear.

Everyone has huddled together beneath an old, giant fir. All twenty-five of us—hunters with their rifles and the beaters. The wet snowstorm howls and whistles above our heads, but it cannot penetrate through this shelter of heavily overhanging green boughs. No one wants to be the first to begin. Let Forest Uncle himself decide what's the best thing for us to do: retrace our steps back or continue this tramping through these

scrawny woods around decaying swamps. If he decides we should go back home, then we will all agree in unison that we just had a stroke of bad luck, and without the least pangs of conscience, head back along the path already beaten through the snow. And Kalnaitis would not object either. Just let Forest Uncle, our main authority in matters of hunting, utter one little word. If he would just begin.

"We have to lick them. Seeing as we've already..."

So there you have it! This is what we had waited for! So once again we would flounder through the snow, our sheepskin coats and quilted jackets so wet that you could wring them out. We would have to drag on while our legs still carried us. If Trakimas said so, there was no way around it. We had to move on.

"Seeing as we've already made our way through so far... They've got to be in the wood by the Samanie Swamp, waiting things out there, where it's more sheltered."

If Trakimas thought the elk had gone there, it meant that's where they would probably be... Only it was still well over a mile to this impassable swamp. That was the big problem...

Water has leaked in through the tops of our rubber boots and squelches around as we walk. We traipse on and on with a heavy, measured tread. Twenty-five men. A mighty force. Terrifying in its determination. We must bag the elk. Five, or at least three... If worst came to worst, even just a yearling calf. Just so at least we could bring down one.

The snow is smooth and monotonously white. The bare young forest moans mournfully under the assault

of the wind. But the tall dark firs drone plaintively and protractedly.

The man walking in front of me stumbles, falls, and picks himself back up. I shudder, throwing off the heavy torpor and once again can clearly hear the howling of the blizzard, until he begins to move again, waddling along as before, and his back almost disappears from sight into the blank, inscrutable whiteness...

Elk! Elk tracks! Quite recently here, beneath the dark firs, the large, dark animals had been roaming about...

Our long, sprawling chain froze. We were stopped by Trakimas's voice. He had been the first to spy the fresh elk tracks. Our drowsiness vanished as if by magic. However, not one of us ventures to walk over and take a look at the tracks for himself: there are other huntsmen standing ahead in the chain, and to leave the path and make our way through the virgin snow—not on your life!

But gradually we begin to come to our senses. We make our way towards the head of the chain. The elk are somewhere nearby! And they passed through here just a short while ago...

Trakimas follows after the tracks and soon returns. The swamp is only a stone's throw away. The elk had indeed gone there. But then perhaps they had already crossed over and now there were five more swamps separating us from them... But we'll try to flush them out. Maybe we'll be lucky...

Now I want desperately not to be the one to take a shot and miss...

Trakimas is tracing out something on the snow with a stick, explaining to the beaters from which direction they should approach, where to drive them out. Downwind, right along the edge of the swamp. He assigns each of the hunters a number, telling them where to take up position.

And once again we're trudging waist-deep through the snow. But when you know your position, the spot where you'll be standing, somehow it's easier to bear.

Finally you make your way to your spot. You can stop and catch your breath and look to see where your neighbors are standing, take a look around at your sector. If the elk approaches from the thicket, you'll have to wait until it appears in that glade over there. You insert cartridges in both barrels, place the gunstock comfortably beneath your armpit, so that at an instant's notice you can bring it up to your shoulder.

But there are still no elk in sight.

Only the sound of a voice carries suddenly from somewhere off in the distance. It's coming from the swamp. Barely audible. A faint cry, lost in the drone of the blizzard. You can't tell whether it's a cry for help or whether someone just lost his way.

Now the snow no longer hinders us, and we pay no mind to where the bushes are more sparse or where the ground beneath the snow is more solid. We rush headlong towards the voice.

We run up panting, steam literally pouring from our bodies. The beaters had also gathered here, and are milling around right at the swamp and pointing excitedly at something.

In the middle of a quagmire, deceptively blanketed

with snow, in an unfrozen pool, there is a small dark gap, like a black ice-hole. And sticking up from the black water is the head of an elk. Its tracks end at the pool, in deep, trampled-down mud.

So this is where he was, our elk. He would hardly make his way out...

It was strange and unnerving to see in the black swampy abyss, made all the more black by the contrasting whiteness of the untouched snow, the noble, mighty head of the animal with its curved muzzle, crowned with the broad blades of its antlers.

Gathering its strength, the elk jumped half the way out of the bubbling quagmire, pounding its front hooves on the deceptive white banks, trying to gain a foothold. But once again it sunk back into the mire. The only thing it succeeded in doing was to make the pool of black water larger.

How easy it would be now to walk up to it and take aim right at the spot between its antlers. And then we would always find a way of dragging it out of the pool. Twenty-five men—that was a lot of might.

Well, Trakimas, give the command! And all the labors of this hopelessly agonizing day would not be in vain!

"The animal will drown. Such an elk, men! .."

That was all Forest Uncle said.

Four of the most daring, after bending down some birches and cutting off the branches with their knives, moved towards the elk, carefully feeling their way along on the squelching quagmire covered with a layer of loose snow. They would have to shove the branches towards the elk and then toss a few armfuls of twigs

onto the edge of the pool, and the elk would manage to make its way out.

But even though it's drowning, the elk still fears man. And tries to defend itself. Panting, it thrashes about in the small pit filled with black water, tears its forelegs free and, with a mighty effort, thrashes out at its saviours with its sharp hooves. The hunters are well aware of the power behind the elk's legs. It would take only one blow to lay out a man for good.

No, they would never drag it out this way.

We took off our belts and unfastened the leather straps of our rifles. We bound them together, doubled them over, and made a loop at the end. Now we had a fine belt lasso. Well, who's the brave one? Who has a good eye, a steady hand? Without much ado, one of us volunteered. He walked over. Threw the lasso. Again... And it was risky to walk up so close... On the third attempt the loop fastened over the antlers. Now pull, fellows!

The elk raised up above the quagmire, kicking and jerking its head. We literally came crashing down into the snow. Our lasso had not held out; it had snapped in two, even though it had been double thickness.

But we had already heavily trampled up the swamp: across the entire quagmire, from the pool to the bank, there was now a wide, dark path. Once again cold sludge had crept down into our boot tops. We're exhausted to the breaking point. Excitement alone keeps us going: we've got to pull him out!

Without arguments or unnecessary words. We were dragging the elk out of the swamp. But why?

The blizzard had not let up. Snowflakes fell in

swarms into the black abyss of the pool and disappeared without a trace after hitting the water.

Our elk is being sucked in deeper and deeper. He is already motionless. Only in his dark eyes does a living flame still glimmer. Soon it too will be extinguished by the swampy sludge.

We bent down a birch, and now we took turns hacking at it frenziedly with our knives. And this is not some little bush, but a solid tree. With forked branches at the top and a long trunk. Finally we cut it down and pull together the branches at either end of its crown with our belts. What we end up with is a loop, or rather a genuine collar.

Trakimas himself makes his way over towards the elk. Maybe the animal now understands, because it's no longer kicking, not even stirring. Forest Uncle carefully places the birch collar down on its neck.

The trunk turns out to be too short; there's not room enough for all of us to grasp hold. We bind together our belts. Some pull on the trunk, others on the belts. Twenty-five men, biting their lips from the strain and determination. We pull together, stubbornly, savagely. Our rifles are back on the bank, propped up against birches, firs...

The elk tossed its head. Oh, what an indescribable feeling of joy when you pull such a giant and finally wrench it free from the viscous mud.

It was over. We had dragged, hauled it out. We were all coated with mud—some up to their waist, others to their shoulders, and there were some with mud caked on their hats and foreheads.

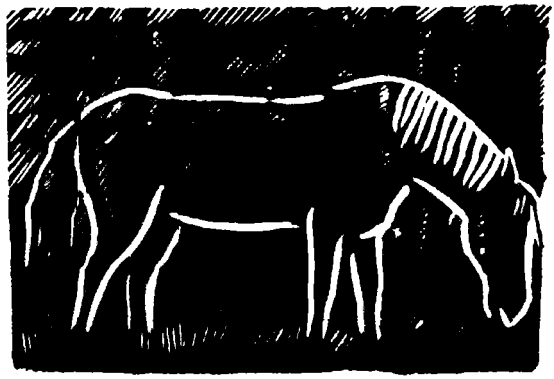
We carefully cut the belts binding together the birch

collar. Our elk is free. It lies on the swampy ground, breathing heavily. And it takes some time before we are able to come to our senses. We step aside respectfully, before it decides to let one of us have it with a hoof...

We pick up our rifles. The elk stands up and shakes itself off. And walks away. Right past us—into the fir grove. The only traces left are the deep mud-spattered depressions left by its hooves in the snow. And soon they too will be covered up by the snow. Only in the snow-blanketed quagmire would there remain for a long time yet a dark, wide, ragged-edged pool.

The grey, dim light of day is waning. Evening is setting in. The night will be impenetrably dark. Tell us, Trakimas, just where is that elk which we were to have "licked"?

And it was still a long way to his cabin... We walk through the heavy, wet snow. Against the howling wind...



The Beautiful Horse*

I had seen it several times, or rather, touched upon it with that instinctive glance which sends no clear signal to the brain and which we frequently employ in our daily life, protecting our frail consciousness from a painful overload of impressions. There was something in the space around the rest home, which did not fit into the fixed register of things; it was not a tree, nor a shrub, nor a car, nor a vacationer, nor a surveyor with a theodolite—it was a small, compact mass which appeared through the foggy morning drizzle or melted into a clot of darkness in the early November twilight. To a distracted consciousness, this "extraneous" thing which first "was located" on the grounds of the rest

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home later required other verbs acknowledging the dynamism of the phenomenon: it "appeared" and "vanished" and finally, with the mighty verb "to live", was elevated to the rank of an animate being: in our island of space, now born of light, now vanishing into darkness, there lived a horse.

By the way, I have skipped ahead here: the word "horse" only came later, because at first it was the phantom of a horse. Yes, we learned that around the vast rest home building, through the unbounded and almost virgin territory, somehow insecurely and precariously seized from forest, river and field, there roamed a phantom horse.

In any other place such a discovery would have aroused alarm, intellectual ferment, but not in this rest home or sanatorium in the environs of Moscow, the strangest institution I have ever come across in the course of my long life.

Ambiguity was at the very foundation of this "sanatorium cum rest home", for no one knew what the true function was of this vast object which had grown up relatively recently on the edge of an old baronial estate: to build up or to ruin the health of its guests. Some showed up with a simple authorization and the unconcealed desire to "indulge in pleasurable pursuits", while others came with a treatment card and the timid hope that here they would find renewal of body and spirit. In this shrine of health there was an incessant holiday peal, and a Bacchic song filled the air.

But from the dense forest various mysterious creatures appeared. One morning the fine coat of new-

fallen snow which had blanketed the earth during the night proved dotted with countless tiny tracks which could not be attributed to any of the habitual residents of the environs of Moscow: foxes, hares, wild boars, or weasels. The solution pointed up the artistic imagination of one of the vacationing women. Suffering from insomnia, she had risen at dawn, drawn back the curtain, and for a moment it seemed that a tsar's mantle had been spread out over the ground. The image suggested the answer to the riddle: the rest home had been visited by ermine—white with black tails; at one time their furs had been fashioned into ceremonial robes for the tsars.

Another time the shadow of a gigantic stag could be seen darting about on the moonlit edge of the forest. It had probably been an elk, but no one ever spotted the animal itself, just a shadow flitting swiftly across the moonlit wanness of the earth and young pine forest.

The mystic aura surrounding the old estate carried over into the daily life of this place. There was an overgrown park, dark linden avenues, a peeling yellow palace with a white-columned portico, an old cemetery, and the pink baroque Church of Consolation of All Afflicted with an Empire style bell tower. In the cemetery, among the metallic openwork crosses under which were strewn the crumbling graves of Elizabeth's ladies-in-waiting and Catherine the Great's nobles, blue lights twinkled at night. Rumour had it that the irrepressible spirits of the ladies-in-waiting of the gay empress, abandoning their cramped abodes, made merry with the spirits of the gallant cavaliers of the most li-

centious court of all the monarchs.

The changeable late autumn air, now robust in a dawn laced with hard frost, and warmed by the sun during the day to a summery fragrance, at other times weak, snivelly, exuding a slippery dampness, was pregnant with the expectation of the miraculous. And when the phantom of the horse appeared, it fit in naturally with the landscape, blending harmoniously with the turbulent shadows beneath the moon and the twinkling of the otherworldly lights.

But I have come to the conclusion that the horse's authenticity was not rejected out of any mystical inclination, but out of attachment to the usual order of things in our everyday life. Our sanatorium was distinguished by its tolerant acceptance of the animal world. Cats abounded inside its walls, and dogs roamed about outside. But cats—small creatures, and moreover with a well-defined useful function—frequently take up semi-legal residence in establishments and even multiply the race of four-legged vagabonds; stray dogs can be found near human habitats where they can find some food until they are noticed—usually during the tempestuous mating season—and are turned over to the dog catchers. But the fact that a horse roamed about freely with no apparent master, some sort of solitary, independent Houyhnhnm—this was simply beyond the comprehension of a Yahoo. That's why it was easier to assume it was a phantom rather than a creature of flesh and blood. Still, the day came when the silhouette of the mysterious horse acquired three-dimensionality; distinct, living color; the bustle of small motions of the flesh, continually adapting itself to its surroundings,

and it became necessary to throw off the veil of self-deception—in our midst there existed a live horse, which moved of its own accord.

I have loved horses ever since I was a young child, since the days when long-maned draught horses would haul carts laden with barrels to the wine cellars which nestled in the large Moscow courtyard, since pasturing horses at night in a Ryazan field at the edge of the Sukhotinsk apple orchards, since the days when dashing Moscow cabmen would race their trotters, cast-offs from the racecourse, through the crooked streets of the city. But how rarely these days I have occasion to see a horse! And here it was, as if right out of my childhood, only something incomprehensible prevented me from approaching it.

Its solitariness was a barrier which I did not dare to cross. At a respectable distance I observed as it leisurely yet intently browsed on the autumn grass—brown patches, with rare veins of living green, and emerald patches, filled with sweet juice; how it would lapse into a drowsy immobility or wander slowly about, flicking its rather short tail to drive away the irksome autumn flies.

At times, in the fiery black sunset or the morning's scarlet-tinged mist, the simple beast of labor would be transformed into a fantastic steed—enormous, perfectly sculpted, equally ready for a spirited gallop through the feather grass or for submission to the iron-clad hand of a mighty hero guiding it towards the enemy, or for a fairy-tale flight among the stars with valiant young Ivan on its back...

And then began my approach towards the horse.

Slowly, fitfully, but inexorably came the day when at a turn in the footpath I found myself closer to the horse, occupied with the patient labor of wrenching sustenance from the impoverished earth and delicately aloof from its surroundings.

Then the horse walked out from the depths of the landscape and began grazing alongside the path which led to the old estate, the church, the cemetery. And I was so close to it that I could smell the faint odor of the animal's wet coat. This unobtrusive, shy creature was uncommonly well-groomed: its tail was clipped and brushed, as were its thick mane and forelock. Its hooves, besprinkled with morning dew, were tidy, smooth and free of shoes. Its croup had been polished with a curry-comb to a luxurious gleam. Clean and washed was the full, spherical, dark violet eye which gazed at me, taking into its transparent hazy depth the surrounding expanse with my tiny figure in the foreground. There was beauty and significance in the world reflected in its large, deep, benevolent pupil, but the other eye reflected nothing—dull, covered over with a bluish cataract, it stared lifelessly into emptiness. The horse rarely and firmly blinked its sighted eye, but the dead eye could not defend itself, even when a blade of grass grazed it or a fly began to struggle its way into the mollusk-like clot beneath the fringe of grey-tipped lashes.

It was strange, but instead of disfiguring the horse, the cataract added to its dignity. The inborn defect had not prevented the old mare from fulfilling her life's function; she had done her share of work in her time and had been rewarded with her present life of liberty.

This was not a simple country horse. There was a mark of breeding in her, although I don't know what bloods had intermingled to create such a delighftul creature. Among her ancestors there had undoubtedly been heavy draught horses; from them she had inherited the massiveness of chest and croup, the sturdiness of her legs with their shaggy fetlocks, the breadth of her still straight back. But you never come across such small draught horses. Small-boned and short in stature, she seemed a mixture between a cart-horse and a pony. However, such a combination is just as improbable as a mixture between a St. Bernard and a lap-dog. In her frame might and diminutiveness coexisted in a rare harmony, and the torrid bay color of her coat was beautiful.

At this point she was noticed by a large reddish dog with a dark muzzle which decided to gain favor with its providers. After all, the appearance of a stray horse around the front door to the main building was a clear violation of order. The dog ran up to the horse and began barking officiously at it. The horse continued to calmly nibble the grass. Then the dog began barking louder, more menacingly, wrinkling its muzzle and baring its yellow fangs. It was working itself into a frenzy, but the horse, which had seen so much in its time, attributed no significance to this affected fury. The mare's imperturbability perplexed the dog. It ceased its barking and whipped its tail around a few times, as if asking someone's forgiveness for a performance which had fallen through, and then noticed that it was being observed. The fur on the back of its neck bristled, and it launched into a high-pitched barking,

ran behind the horse and attempted to seize hold of its leg. The horse was unable to see the dog, as it had approached from the direction of her lifeless eye. Hesitating a moment, the horse divined the dog's location, turned around and assiduously, the way she did everything, struck out with her hind hooves. Had she struck the dog, it would have been the end of it. But the horse did not want to do it harm. The dog had taken it into its head to play the role of vigilant and selfless servant, and the horse reluctantly but conscientiously playacted along with it. In the interims between skirmishes the horse continued to nibble the grass, quietly edging further from the rest home. Finally the dog felt it had fulfilled its mission, yapped once or twice and went prancing off to tell the rest of the pack of its victory.

My admiration of the horse grew even more. She had fallen into a stupid and tiresome incident, but had come out of it with remarkable dignity...

Casting off her mysterious distance, the stranger had become an ordinary, masticating, munching horse, but the imprint of inscrutability remained. Who did she belong to, why did she roam around alone, wherever she wanted, without the restrictions imposed upon every individual belonging to civilization, whether animal or man, where did she go to spend the night, from where and when did she return?..

Some of the vacationers tried to enter into a closer relationship with the horse, but she remained aloof and would accept neither sugar from their palms nor black bread, modestly contenting herself with the autumn grass. Long years spent around people had taught her

wise circumspection. The horse did not understand the other thing—that her very neglect was a challenge to the established order.

The background of sounds in our little world was diverse; it included the rumble of voices, the creak of footsteps, the banging of doors, the splashing of water in the pool, the tinkling of glasses in the bar, the clatter of billiard balls, like bone against bone, and the taut, muffled whirr of tennis balls, music, shots resounding from the television screen, the avalanche of thunder from the partially opened door of the movie theatre, abruptly cut off, but still resounding as an echo, the fragment of a song, laughter, cries... The gap of instantaneous silence was also filled with sound—a high, clear ring, once again embracing rumbling, squeaks, rustles, whispers, roars... From out of this chaos of sounds one picked up separate words, sentences. More and more frequently I began to hear: "Horse... Horse... Horse..." The tenacious attention of the idle vacationers was riveted on the wanderer. Benevolent, filled with warm amazement, but it made me uneasy. From time to time voices would break out from the well-wishing chorus:

"It's against the regulations..."

"But maybe someone's looking for it?.."

"What if it's sick?.."

"...Foot and mouth disease, glanders, rabies..."

"It has a bad eye..."

"...Cataract? But what if it's trachoma?.."

"If every old mare..."

"...There's not enough grass..."

And then I noticed that the cat droppings had dis-

appeared from the enormous unoccupied upstairs hall which I used to cross through on my way to the dining room, and understood that the cats had been liquidated... And soon the quiet and emptiness outside the front doors told of another loss: there were no longer any of the delightful, eternally hungry stray dogs around, which had gathered here at mealtimes in hopes of a handout. Slyly, without a word to anyone, they had all been caught. The thought occurred to me that perhaps some kind soul was buying up with these scraps the life of the homeless horse. The same thought, as was later confirmed, flashed through many heads. But when the horse suddenly disappeared, everyone began saying in one voice that she had been shot at the urging of some ubiquitous bastard.

But she returned—and not alone. With her came a forester, a markedly aged, sturdy, wiry man in a green forester's outfit, a peaked cap with a metal badge and high rubber boots turned down below his knees. His reddish hair was flecked with grey and he was freckled, with a greying, tobacco-strained moustache. His transparent green eyes, perpetually squinting from the lashing branches in the dense thickets he walked, smiled out benevolently from their deep sockets. A solid working man, with reliability written in each vein, wrinkle, gesture and word. He had turned the experience of many years into goodness, into a confident acceptance of life, which by all appearances he knew how to coerce into justness.

"...For heaven's sake!" he scoffed. (I had walked over during the middle of his conversation with the vacationers.) "Who would allow her to be shot? And who

does Maruska bother?"

He brought his hand back and stroked the mare's high, solid cheekbone. She stood behind the forester, nestling her head against his back and taking in his familiar smell.

"She and I worked hard together for almost twenty years. Now let her run free, she's earned an indefinite leave."

"But doesn't it matter that she ... well ... goes around like?.." someone asked.

The forester hesitated before answering, and his smile became a trifle strained; he wanted to make sure he understood the motive behind the question: concern for the horse's safety, or disapproval of Maruska's liberty? Faith in peoples' good intentions took the upper hand. Laughing softly, he said:

"Who would want to harm her? Who would raise a hand against an old deserving horse?.. Maruska is smart and well-mannered, she doesn't go where she doesn't belong, she's never dirtied up anything in her life. She's totally harmless."

"Please take good care of her! " requested a round-faced old lady with an army Guards' button pinned on her wool sweater.

"Goodness gracious! There are only the two of us out there... Save for the elks and wild boars! " the forester responded, now completely cheered. "Let's go," he said to Maruska. "We have to let the people rest."

"You'll still let her come to see us, won't you?" the old lady with the pin asked.

"Yes, ma'am," the forester laughed, touched his

fingers to his cap band and then headed back to his forest, and Maruska trudged along behind.

Everyone was cheered by the conversation with the forester, and no one paid any attention to the fact that old Maruska was sheltered from fate only by the thin cloak of the forester's goodness, and not by the law. There is no law for the protection of beautiful old horses... And no one paid any attention to the truck which passed by the main building and headed into the forest about two days after the touching conversation. In the truck sat two men with dull, broad faces. Nor did anyone attribute any significance to the faint muffled shot which cracked out in the damp expanse. But when the truck came tearing back, many noticed four thick brown sticks jutting up from the back of the truck. Those sticks were the legs of the slaughtered horse.

And then the bells of the Church of Consolation of All Afflicted, removed long ago, began to ring out in alarm. With their cast-iron clappers they proclaimed to the world the evil which had been committed. And no one believed the Know-It-All who maintained that this was the reverberating drone of the electric milking machine picking up power. There was a dairy farm on the other side of a broad gully, but why had no sounds come from there on other days?..

"But would it be worth raising a stir over an old, half-blind, useless horse?" some rational-minded person would ask. But this was a beautiful horse... And then—I worry about the future. Remember in Ray

Bradbury's story what the butterfly wing, damaged in pre-historic times, turned into at a high level of civilization? And here we're not talking about a Papilionaceae wing, but a Horse. A Beautiful Horse, killed not accidentally, but deliberately. What if in a million years' time, because of this, the globe just splits apart? A globe inhabited by people better than we?..

Well, no one looks so far ahead.

But they should...

My Friend the Bear*

Notes of a Wildlife Expert

In a stony niche at the slope of a volcano lay a she-bear, holding with all four paws a cub which grumbled at her breast.

Suddenly the she-bear heard the rasping sound of skis. Dropping the cub, she poked her muzzle into the opening of the den, clearing away the snow with her forehead, and saw a hunter. In a white camouflage wrap, carrying a rifle, he was making his way over the blue-tinted snow directly towards her. She quickly ducked back inside the den, but the hunter had already caught a glimpse of her muzzle and cocked his rifle. He walked up to the den and threw a clump of snow

* English translation ©Raduga Publishers 1986

into the opening. The she-bear did not want to come out. The hunter took off a ski and shoved it into the den with his left hand, holding the rifle ready with his right. The she-bear seized the ski between her teeth and splintered off the tip. The man tore off a piece of white cloth from his wrap, wound it around a stick, set fire to it and thrust it into the den. The animal snatched the stick and tore the cloth to bits. Then the hunter walked off to get some birch bark. And in that instant the soot-black she-bear, ploughing up the snow, scrambled out of the den and went bounding uphill. The shot rang out abruptly. The she-bear tumbled down onto the snow, but immediately jumped back up and, seared by the bullet, rushed with increasing speed up the hill. A second bullet sprayed out against a rock right by her muzzle. The cub cried out beside the opening in the den. Dropping to his knee, the man grabbed it, raised it over his head and began to beat it, thinking the young animal's cries would bring its mother running back to its defense. But the howls did not bring her back. And the hunter hadn't really thought they would. He had hunted for many years and knew that she-bears defend their cubs only after they take them out of the den.

The cub snarled like a cat, flailed its paws, and the hunter flung it into the den. But the cub managed to dig its claws into the den's edge and, instead of taking shelter in it, went scrambling down the slope towards the ocean shore. Its tiny tracks stitched through the sun-softened snow.

The hunter ascended to the crest of the hill behind which the she-bear had disappeared and saw that the

tracks swung along smoothly for a good distance. This meant the wound was not fatal.

He followed the cub's tracks and soon cursed himself for letting it go. The tracks led to a steep cliff. The man stopped short in indecision and astonishment. The small animal, still inexperienced, had made its way along the very edge of the precipice and had climbed out onto the branch of a dwarf Siberian pine. The branch hung out over the precipice. Far below the ocean rumbled and bared the white teeth of its breakers.

Cautiously, carefully planting each step, the hunter began working his way sideways along the ledge. He had to press his spine against the bare rock face.

The cub was lying with its eyes closed. The hunter reached over to it with one of his ski poles. He lowered the wrist strap of the pole over the animal's head and began to twist it around, tightening the strap like a noose... The branch sagged, but the cub sank its claws into it and froze. The hunter tugged on the strap, but the cub didn't even open its eyes, as if it weren't a cub at all, but a brown growth on the branches. But when the hunter finally managed to tear it away from the branch, the "growth" suddenly came to life. Like a little red demon it struggled at the end of the ski, flailing its paws, trying to tear off the noose, and in the process cutting the tip of its ear in two. The man seized the cub by the scruff of its neck and, holding it in his outstretched arm, carefully made his way back to a safe place. He pushed the tiny beast into his knapsack. The cub immediately fell quiet in the darkness.

The hunter's tent stood a considerable distance

away. The cub, warmed by the heat of the man's back, lay calmly almost the whole way. But suddenly it began to toss about and snort, tearing the knapsack with its claws. It tore it into strips, and even tore the cotton wadding out of the hunter's jacket. The hunter flung the sack into the tent. The sack hopped, rolled about, and sneezed. The man opened it and realized what torment the cub had caused for itself: it had torn open a pack of homegrown tobacco which had been inside the knapsack.

The cub took refuge behind the teakettle in a corner of the tent and began sobbing bitterly, like a small child.

The hunter walked out and fed the sledge dogs some dried fish, and then began preparing supper on the small cast iron stove, not much larger than a loaf of bread. When he took the teakettle from the corner, the cub got up. The man no longer seemed so terrifying. It was the knapsack which had been terrifying. The cub edged around it, keeping close to the inside of the tent frame, and accidentally knocked down a pair of binoculars with its paw. The hunter put the binoculars back in their place. The cub knocked them down once again. The man put them back again. Again the cub knocked them over. The man stretched out his hand towards the binoculars and received a set of scratches for his persistence. The cub received a slap and once again took refuge in the corner.

After supper the hunter extinguished the candle and lay down to sleep. The cub stirred, made its way over to the man's head, found his ear and began to suck on it. At this point the dogs outside began to raise

a ruckus. The cub immediately scrambled back to its corner. The hunter lit the candle. Now he would have to get up and tie the dogs up further apart, if he was to have any peace that night.

The hunter walked out of the tent. The cub crawled out of its corner, sent the binoculars crashing down, dislodged a knife which had been sticking up out of a log, batted at the candle with its paw, and retreated once more back to its corner. The candle ignited the sweepings and the flame made its way to a pile of birch bark which the hunter had gathered for kindling. The acrid smoke and fire sent the cub tearing out of the tent and it took off running. The dogs set up a deafening howl, ears pinned back and bristling with fury, but the cub made its way off into the darkness of the taiga forest. The hunter tried to unleash the lead dog, but it wheezed hoarsely from its tight collar and wouldn't allow him to open the catch. The hunter was about to smack the dog when he noticed a strange red glow. He turned around and saw flames above the tent.

He put out the fire. But now he had other things to worry about besides the cub. His sleeping bag had been burned and so was one side of the tent. He had no choice but to leave for the settlement in the middle of the night.

The next morning in the thickets of the dwarf Siberian pine sat a she-bear, nursing a cub which stood on its hind paws. The she-bear had found her cub by tracing its tracks and now licked the tattered tip of its ear.

This all took place on the Kamchatka Peninsula...

...This was Vitka's first plane trip, and on one of the longest Aeroflot flights. Sitting in the comfortable passenger cabin of the large jet liner, he thought of the enormous map in the airport which had covered one entire wall. A long thin line had stretched from one corner to the other: Moscow—Petropavlovsk-Kamchatsky.

He was flying across the entire country, but no matter how hard he looked out the porthole, he had not been able to make out the Urals or the Siberian expanses—the only thing visible was the blue sky and the blinding white plain of clouds... Only near Khabarovsk did the clouds part briefly, and Vitka was able to catch a glimpse of the taiga. The hills below were fleecy with snow-blanketed trees, like the thick pile of a terry cloth towel.

Vitka dozed off and awoke when the sign above his seat flashed: "Fasten your seat belts." The plane tore out of the clouds and banked steeply. Vitka saw the Avachinskaya Bay. He recognized it by the famous "three brothers" which he had seen in photographs—three cliffs which jutted up out of the water.

From Petropavlovsk he was to fly on to Tumanovo—a settlement on the east coast of the Kamchatka Peninsula...

The settlement was nestled in a shallow hollow. Below flowed a small river which descended into the ocean near the outermost houses. Vitka was amazed at the size of the ocean waves. So small from the plane, they rose to three times the height of the shed on the

beach. And this was in what appeared to be calm weather.

The hollow was surrounded by mountains. To the north rose the cone of the Kronotskaya volcano, now pink-tinged in the winter sun. To its left and somewhat closer was a beautiful jagged ridge. To the west was a large inactive volcano, its cone sliced off from an explosion. To the left, and invisible behind the volcanic mounds, the Karymsky volcano emitted plumes of smoke.

All the houses in Tumanovo were the same black color, as if they had been charred. It turned out they were all covered with tarred roofing paper, for otherwise the winds here would have pierced right through them.

"Why do all the houses here have such odd additions on all sides?" Vitka asked a man who had flown with him.

"The folk here like this place. A man comes to the Kamchatka thinking to stay for the three years of his contract. He knocks together a little house to last him three years. When his contract is up he flies back home on an extended leave—and then returns once more. He extends his contract and puts up an addition in order to increase his living space. Then he stays on longer and adds on another wing. And most of all the folk here go on this way until they retire." The man pointed to one of the houses and said: "Here's your office."

The director of the state preserve was a man of about sixty. Portly and small of frame, he bustled about beside an empty aquarium... "Fill out an appli-

cation and we'll process it right away and take you to the cottage where you'll be staying."

The "cottage" assigned him turned out to be the same as all the other little houses, with snow piled up almost to its roof...

Vitka was unable to sleep and kept wondering what kind of work he would be given: "Wouldn't it be something if they sent me right away out into the taiga with the research team."

But in the morning he was given the task of hauling firewood on a sledge, and then of chopping frozen coals for the boiler house.

Only at lunch did he pay a brief visit to the building where the research section was housed. The shelves were filled with so many books on biology that he was dazzled.

The director of the research library said:

"There's nothing for you here. You must sign up with the club library. All the fiction is there."

"I'll sign up... But could I come back this evening and take out this book?"

"*Techniques of Field Research*?" the librarian said in surprise. She took the book down from the shelf, leafed through it and, with a shrug of her shoulders put it back in its place. "Take it, if it interests you."

After work Vitka grabbed a quick bite to eat and then sank into his book, quickly forgetting about everything else. It was a specially developed program for studying animals. The techniques of various methods of observation were presented.

Now and again during the night faint sounds carried from the attic. This was an ermine, whose tracks Vitka had noticed on the snow pile by the roof, hunting for mice.

"Things have been quiet for a while now," Vitka thought and looked out the window. It was light outside. He glanced at his watch: "It's already time for work! " Vitka walked outside and heard the rumble of an electric train passing by.

"There are no electric trains here! " he remembered suddenly. "What's making that noise?"

The noise emanated from the ocean at the other end of the settlement. And the noise of the breakers was very similar to that of a train.

When Vitka left for work the sky was bright blue, almost a deeper shade than the sky in the South. But all of a sudden there was a flurry of white, fluffy snowflakes, and soon even the house next door was hidden from view...

"What an unexpected blizzard," Vitka remarked as he was making wooden shelves for herbarium samples.

The geobotanist, Galina Dmitriyevna, laughed: "There's no such thing as an unexpected blizzard here! You can always expect one."

The blizzard raged the entire day.

Vitka spent most of that night lying awake in panic. The blizzard ground against the walls, as if scores of stiff brooms were scraping against the house. And it sounded like someone was pouring out sand onto the roof from sacks. The little house shuddered beneath

the powerful gusts of wind, and Vitka feared the roof would be lifted right off. He hoped only that this was not the first year the house had been standing here...

Vitka awoke before daybreak, although it was far into the night before he had finally drifted off to sleep. It was quiet outside. He flicked the light switch, but nothing happened. He groped around for his flashlight and opened the front door. Behind it was another white door. Several seconds passed before he realized that it was snow—the imprint of the door in the snow. The house had been completely buried...

"It's a good thing the door opens inward," Vitka thought. He brought over a stool, grabbed a shovel and began clearing a way up and out, sending snow flying right into the hall. The snow, piled up to the roof, was heavy and compact, and the shovel stuck in it as if it were a head of cabbage.

And suddenly the blinding daylight struck Vitka's eyes. It was already light, but the house, as the whole settlement, had been buried beneath the snow.

THE FIRST BEAR

At last the time came when the Kamchatka bears came out of hibernation, and Vitka began going out to the taiga to observe the wild animal which he had travelled so many miles from home to see...

They say that a bear's paw print is similar to that of a barefoot man. Now that Vitka could see them for himself, the resemblance seemed very slight: only that the animal waddled, and that the width of its step was

approximately the same as that of a man. Maybe in the loose snow you could confuse them, but on a dense, damp snowdrift, where each claw leaves its imprint, it was impossible to mistake a bear's track for a man's. The imprints of the front paws resembled enormous beans lying crosswise in the animal's path. In front of the "beans" were the small impressions of short toes and the furrows left by long claws.

Vitka looked around once again to see if the bear might be somewhere nearby, and then began following after the tracks. This was his very first opportunity to observe for himself the habits of the bear. It wasn't like finding out something about bears from a book—these were the tracks of a live animal, and what he would learn from them now depended entirely on him.

Vitka knew that his rifle was loaded, but just to make certain, he pulled the cartridges out of the barrels and looked at their grey lead tips. His rifle was only for an extreme emergency, if a hungry bear were to suddenly come charging at him.

On the bank of a stream the animal had trampled the snow and dug up a wide hole. Vitka measured its depth—twenty-four and a half inches. At such a depth the animal could smell out the remains of the fish which had perished after spawning. The gill arches and jagged lower jaw of a silver salmon were spread out on the snow.

The bear stood no less than two and a half feet tall. This Vitka determined by the clump of fur on a branch beneath which the bear had passed. The distance from the branch to the paw prints was thirty-two inches. The bear might be even taller; it could have crouched

down and crawled beneath the branch, but it could not be any shorter.

Beside an overturned decayed log the short ribbon of a field vole's tracks was broken off by the grooves of the bear's paws.

The bear had dug beneath the snow of the tundra clearing for berries, had tried to find cones on a dwarf Siberian pine. On a sunbaked spot, where the slopes of the hollow were free of snow, it had eaten last year's dried pine grass. For some unknown reason it had broken suddenly into a run. The tracks, which had stretched along smoothly, now became broken and lapsed further on into bounds. It was impossible to tell what had startled the animal...

It was already dark by the time Vitka returned home. He lay in bed and it seemed the whole ceiling was covered with bear's paw prints. And no matter how he tossed and turned, an endless procession of clawed tracks spun before his eyes.

Vitka had thought that once on the Kamchatka all you had to do was walk out of the settlement and you would immediately see bears. He had pictured them roaming around the garbage sites, like dogs. But as it turned out, many who lived in the settlement had never seen a live bear. And Vitka had still not seen one either.

But there were almost a hundred thousand bears in the country, and the Kamchatka had one of the largest bear populations of all...

...Today was Vitka's day off, and he could spend the whole day sitting in the shelter he had prepared the day before, waiting for the bear to appear. He had

found a spot where the animal came to browse on the green stalks of grass poking up from the bank of the stream. But he had still not seen the bear itself.

He left the settlement in the faint gray light of early dawn.

His shelter–a white, makeshift cabin of blocks of snow–stood almost right at the very bank of an estuary at the mouth of the stream. The shelter was totally inconspicuous: snow still blanketed the area surrounding it, and along the bank of the estuary were towering fragments of ice floes, which stood as high as the cabin itself.

A thick shroud of snow still covered the forest, but Kamchatka rowan trees poked up among the stone birch, and green thickets of dwarf Siberian pine were visible along the slopes of the hollow. The taiga floor was growing more dense, losing its resemblance to a park with sparse trees and becoming more similar to a real taiga.

From the moment he took up his post in the cabin Vitka maintained the strictest vigilance, not wanting to miss that instant when the bear would appear suddenly on the tundra.

But the sun climbed higher in the sky, and the bear did not come...

Suddenly a sound like that of cannonfire thundered out nearby. Vitka was so startled that he almost knocked out one of the snow walls. Large ripples spread out in the shallow water. It turned out that a many-ton ice floe, similar to a mushroom, had split in two.

Vitka walked out to the bank of the estuary and saw

an ice-mushroom looming in the fog. While the tide was still out he decided to go and take a closer look at it.

The fog was probably so dense because the evening was unseasonably warm. The snow and ice were melting like sugar. A green, icy leg of the ice floe rested on the sand. Large drops fell constantly below from the massive mushroom cap, making small craters in the sand. Falling in different spots with varying force, they drummed out a gay, almost march-like rhythm. The cap of the mushroom, eaten out from below by the ripples of water, was so fantastically jagged that Vitka, squatting down, lost himself in contemplating the bluish-green patterns which had formed. And suddenly the same thing happened as before on the estuary—an edge of the ice floe broke off and went crashing down right before his eves! Vitka started back, frightened by the loud crash. He had been just about to stick his head beneath it to examine it better, and just then it had collapsed... Blotting off the cut on his finger with a handkerchief, he raised it to his white lips and blew on it, and then pulled on the buttstock of his rifle. It did not budge: the barrels had been crushed by a heavy fragment of ice, like a concrete slab. To move it, even a fraction of an inch, was completely out of the question... The rifle which he so prized, which he wiped and oiled every day, was now lodged firmly in the wet sand. He pulled harder—still it did not budge. "Maybe I could shove some kind of log beneath the slab and raise it up?" he thought. "But what chance would one person have of managing alone? And where could you find such a log? The tide

will start rising and the rifle will be lost forever in the salt water. Something has to be done..." Finally he came up with a plan: dig up a trench around the rifle, make a small tunnel beneath the ice floe.

Vitka began digging up the sand using both his knife and his hands. It was terrifying just to think that at any moment the ice floe could quite easily crush him to death.

It was not an easy task working with the wet, dense sand. But Vitka was glad that he had at least come up with some plan of action...

A dark patch loomed up ahead in the fog. Vitka raised his head and went numb: out of the fog appeared a bear. But Vitka felt no joy at the long-awaited encounter: the bear, lightly swinging its paws, was heading straight towards him. In desperation Vitka pulled on his rifle. But he already knew that it was useless: he still hadn't dug out enough sand. Two crows fluttered in the fog above the animal's head. They perched now on the bear's back, now on the ground nearby. Vitka squeezed his back against the ice floe. It appeared the bear had still not spotted him. It stopped and scratched up the moss with its claws. The crows immediately flew closer, keeping themselves just out of the bear's reach. The bear crushed something beneath its paw and devoured it: it had probably caught a field vole.

The animal was now so close that Vitka could see it with startling clarity: almost black with a grey patch on the ruff of its neck, the fur on its sides matted like an old fur coat. It stood and scratched its claws into the moss.

On all fours, Vitka slowly crept underneath the ice floe, under that section of the cap which was still in one piece, but which could collapse any minute. From beneath the low icy mushroom only the bear's paws were visible. Vitka's heart was pounding so wildly that he was afraid the bear would hear it. Large drops of icy water drummed down on his back, his head, his hands. Vitka crouched on all fours on the wet sand, but he did not notice the dampness... The paws moved off to the side, and were hidden behind the icy leg of the ice floe. Vitka huddled, not knowing whether the bear would now enter from behind, or whether it had simply gone away. He was afraid to stir. No sounds were audible except for the tremulous patter of the falling drops. He backed up from underneath the ice floe and stood up slowly. The bear was gone!

Vitka had never thought that he would feel such a surge of happiness, not because he had finally seen a bear, but because it had disappeared so quickly...

WHO IS AFRAID OF WHOM?

It was late evening when Vitka next reached the field hut. He had volunteered to go out into the field and the director had assigned him the task of laying wooden planks over the streams, swathing the goat's-beard on the phenological trail, and setting up distance markers.

Shutting the door of the hut behind him, he sat clutching his rifle for quite some time, afraid even to step outside to get water from the stream for tea. This

was his first time out in the field alone, and he had the feeling that there was something stalking about in the twilight around the hut. Maybe it was the same bear which had already raided the hut and was now preparing to make another attack. Vitka opened his eyes and listened intently to the night sounds—the rustling of the wind, the creaking of the roof, the cry of a gull on the estuary...

It was just turning light when he left the hut... He ate breakfast only after he had constructed plank bridges over the first stream. Then he fashioned poles and laid them across the marsh, cut down the goat's-beard, and made a passageway through the high grass. The thump of his axe and the noise of his scythe had alerted all living creatures around...

A gigantic wall of grass towered up in the stream valley. These were real grass jungles through which he had to pass. There grew goat's-beard with leaves like those of maple, only larger; wild angelica so large that it bore a greater resemblance to a tree than a grass; hellebore with boat-shaped leaves. But the goat's-beard grew the thickest of all. It was so dense that you could only see three feet ahead. In order just to walk and see anything underfoot, Vitka slashed right and left with the barrels of his rifle, clearing a path for himself. But the grass was young and succulent and had still not ceased growing. In 24 hours the goat's-beard grew the height of a pencil.

Vitka drowned in the green foliage. There were leaves everywhere—above, below and before his eyes. He tripped over fallen branches, stumbled into shallow holes, imperceptible among the grass. Nothing was

visible: where the thickets ended, how much ground he had covered. There wasn't even a tree to climb upon and look around. Maybe there were some around, but how could one make them out through all this grass?..

The only way he could maintain his course was by the sun—no other signs were visible. A patch of sky overhead and endless thickets of grass all around—that was all that met the eye.

And suddenly Vitka came out onto a small clearing in the midst of the grass jungle. Here the grass only reached to his waist, and among this low grass an even row of pits stood out clearly.

These were the remnants of an old native Kamchatka settlement, still not entirely erased by time. Hunters in the settlement said that such pits could be found here and there, but none of the long time residents knew just when the native dwellings had stood on the spot where these pits were dug.

Vitka sat down on the sloping edge of a pit and tried to picture just how people had lived here hundreds of years earlier.

They had probably hunted bears and caught fish in the estuary... Vitka thought of a custom about which he had just read and wondered whether it could actually have been practised here: "Kill one child out of a set of twins, and throw the sick out to be devoured by the dogs"? He found it hard to believe in this savagery, which Russians claimed they had encountered when they first came to the Kamchatka.

There was a rustle in the grass to Vitka's side. He stood up, holding his finger on the safety catch of his loaded rifle, ready at any moment to shoulder it...

He held his pose for a long time, and then made his way further along through the goat's-beard. Nearby the grass looked as if it had been trampled by a bear. The animal had left the same path through the brittle goat's-beard as Vitka. The bear was close by, but Vitka could not see it. Maybe the bear was still as close as it had been before, but how could you spot it in such a thicket of greenery. The only thing left for him to do was to follow the tracks and try at least to learn something from them.

Vitka stepped along carefully, parting the grass with the barrels of his rifle. He spied a fresh lair. In places on it blades of grass jutted up straight, having broken loose from other tangled blades. Nearby he found a second lair, and further on ten more. It appeared that the bear had been eating in a prone position: lying on its belly, it had browsed on the grass around it. This, of course, would have been quite easy to do in such grass. Only Vitka could not figure out whether only one, or perhaps two or even more had eaten here. There were a lot of paths tunnelled out through the grass.

Beside one of the lairs were the scattered remains of a bird's nest. The grass around it was especially trampled and had even been licked clean. The bear had probably devoured the fledglings, dragging down the nest from a small honeysuckle bush.

"It's not that often that bears attack humans," Vitka thought. "But then people don't often go snooping around in such places."

He pulled out his notebook in order to jot down the location of the lairs and make a note of what kind of

grass the bear had eaten. It was a bit unnerving to be taking a pencil into his hand instead of a rifle. He felt like leaning his back against a tree, so as to at least protect himself from behind. But there was nothing around except for the tall grass.

He had read in his manual that one of the difficulties encountered by a person studying the habits of animals was the fact that the animal feared the observer.

"But things are doubly difficult for me," Vitka thought. "The observer also fears the animal."

The grass rustled behind his back and Vitka turned around sharply, aiming his rifle in the direction from which the sound had come. He waited and listened, but once again all was silent. Maybe it had just been one of the trampled stalks straightening back up? He picked up the pencil which he had dropped when he grabbed for his rifle. Again he heard a rustle, now to his side. He no longer had any doubts—there was a bear nearby. The bear, of course, had also heard or sensed Vitka's presence, but instead of running, for some reason it had begun roaming nearby, and this thought filled Vitka with terror. All kinds of alarming thoughts entered his head: "Maybe the bear was hiding its catch? Last year one of the men from the settlement had stumbled across a bear in a thicket of dwarf Siberian pine. The bear was hiding away a seal. Fortunately the bear was small. It struck the man with its paw, knocking him off his feet, and then ran away. The man had shown everyone his metal cigarette case which had been crushed by the blow of the bear's paw. But it was unlikely that a bear would be browsing on grass had it

just killed a deer. But then perhaps it was wounded—that would explain why it was eating lying down."

Vitka listened intently, waiting: any second now the grass would rustle loudly and the wild animal would come rushing at him... But no bear came running towards him and the grass did not stir. Vitka also stood motionless and waited, having long since released the safety catch. The bear of course sensed his presence.

Vitka began to feel as though he was suffocating in the midst of this green jungle. Maybe it had become stuffy because the sun had hidden behind dark clouds and rain had begun pattering on the leaves.

It fell for no more than five minutes. Hoping that the bear's departure had been concealed by the noise of the rain, Vitka turned and began making his way through the grass, away from the lairs. He was instantly soaked. Directly ahead a branch crackled—Vitka leaped aside, but again, directly in front of him the tips of the goat's-beard began to sway! Horror-stricken, Vitka straightened up, not knowing in which direction to aim his rifle. In this wet grass thicket he felt as if he were in turbid water swarming with crocodiles. Only in the impenetrable grayish-green murk there were bears, and not crocodiles. Steam rose up from his clothing—terror had filled him with a feverish heat. Now the rustling was coming from all sides. If only there were a tree nearby he could climb or a clearing where he could look around. But there was nothing except the impenetrable grass.

"I should fire from both barrels and send all these bears scattering! To hell with them! "

Vitka brought his rifle up to his shoulder and

pressed on the trigger... He pressed with all his might, but no shot resounded... His hands went numb—all this time his rifle had been unloaded...

There was a metallic crunch as he cracked open his rifle, and then he pulled the waterproofed cartridges out of his pocket and shoved them into the barrels...

But something had come over Vitka: he no longer even wanted to fire. Completely overwhelmed, he sank down to the ground and thought: "How can this be? What's happening to me? Has everything been lost? I worked so long to be able to be around these animals and now to shoot and run? Where could I run anyway? I'm just a coward. Pure and simple. What good is Kamchatka to me without bears? Why did I even come here? I would rather they tear me to bits than to be so afraid. I'm not going to fear them anymore! I swear I'll never back away from a bear again. Starting today! No matter what might happen! "

He got up and moved decisively forward. He parted the grass and walked out towards the stream.

A little to the side two young bears splashed one after the other across the stream. They were wet and therefore appeared frail, their fur was all clumped together—genuine imps. One paused on the bank, raised up on its hind legs and began to crane its head this way and that, which resembled in its youthfulness and wetness a hammerhead on a slender handle. It caught a glimpse of Vitka and scrambled off into the grass.

"And it's these creatures which sent me into such a panic?" Vitka thought peevishly, and slinging his rifle over his shoulder he headed down along the stream. Wading through the water was more pleasant than

crawling through the grass.

Green walls towered to his right and left. And only when nearby the leaves in the wall of grass stirred and then parted for an instant did he realize that this had not been a black shadow, but a large bear's head which had ducked back into the grass. Obviously there was also a she-bear with the cubs...

But just the same Vitka did not take the rifle from his shoulder.

MAKING FRIENDS

That day Vitka climbed up into his tree loft for the first time to spend the night. But it turned out that even from such a height it was no easy matter to spot a bear: while you sit in one spot it might be roaming around a couple miles away...

Towards evening even the big birds, which at first had behaved so warily, almost ceased to pay attention to him. A sea eagle took up a perch close by on a dry branch and no longer ever glanced in the direction of the loft, and on the same birch, directly overhead, a cuckoo bird cuckooed.

In the evening chill a mist began to rise up from the nearby small lake. The trees in the distance melted into the twilight. The mountains to the west floated in a smoky haze. All around was a silence so profound that one was afraid even to stir.

Visible from the loft was a large section of a stream with bears' paths running along its banks, and a spacious clearing where bears' tracks were also visible.

That night the gulls cried out in alarm over the small lake. Something had disturbed their sleep—probably a wild animal passing along the bank.

"What had it been? A fox? Wolverene? Or a bear? How could I lure a bear here?" Vitka wondered. And suddenly he thought of music. Seals swim to the sounds of music! The fellows back at the settlement had a portable tape recorder. He could tape something and play it here. What kind of music could he tape for a bear? Beethoven?.. No, it would have to be something closer in spirit, like "The Song of the Volga Boatmen"...

Vitka awoke when the whole sky was already light. He remembered immediately where he was and did not stir in the loft, and only raised his head slightly and peered down at the stream below, the bush, the large clearing a little distance away... No bears were visible anywhere. The stream murmured monotonously and the swans called to one another on the estuary. A Siberian tit cheeped and fluttered out from beneath the loft and almost landed right on Vitka's head. It checked itself in mid-flight and then changed its course and landed on the sharp tip of the twig which Vitka had trimmed off yesterday evening with a knife so that it wouldn't catch on his sleeve or rustle when he moved around in the loft. The tit perched on the severed edge of the twig, cocked its head from side to side and examined Vitka in surprise. And on the sharp, freshly cut tip there hung, like a cat's whiskers, a clump of brown bear's fur. Vitka stared at this clump in horror, and whether he wanted to or not, he was forced to conclude that during the night a bear had

made its way up the steps nailed into the sloping trunk of the birch right to the loft! Judging by the color of the fur, it was the same bear which had raided the hut. It was a bit terrifying to think that a bear had made its way right up to him during the night, but at the same time Vitka was heartened by the thought that a bear had been right beside him and had not touched him. This meant that he had been right in thinking that the bear was harmless.

The next day he spotted the bear from the window of the hut. The animal was browsing on the tundra near the estuary.

"I must try to make friends with him," Vitka thought. "Then I'll be able to follow openly after him in the taiga and simply observe everything that he does."

Vitka descended to a low-lying spot and began walking slowly around its edge, making a huge circle around the bear, all the while moving closer and closer. At times he would get down on all fours and pretend to be eating the grass in order to convince the animal of his peaceful intentions...

The bear browsed for two or three hours, and the whole time Vitka circled around him, moving ever closer. Only a slight distance now remained between him and the bear, but he had to approach even closer.

According to statistics, the greatest number of injuries to those working with trained animals on the circus arena are caused by brown bears. One of the oldest trainers who worked with a mixed group of predatory animals wrote of the brown bear: "One day it will suck on your ear, and the next it might bite

through your throat." But Vitka tried not to think of the danger. He had decided not to be afraid, and now he had to keep going and not think about what could happen.

The bear was not overly large, but neither was it small: if it were to raise up on its hind legs, it would stand much taller than Vitka. Its fur was light brown, exactly the same as that which had been left on the loft and on the nail in the hut. The bear pricked its tattered ear.

Now Vitka was only about five yards away. He could toss it some sausage, but he was afraid to frighten the animal with an abrupt movement. Vitka bent over and, using his hands as if they were claws, began digging up grass roots and then smacked his lips loudly, pretending to eat them. The bear looked at him with interest and began to suck in the air through its nostrils, trying to ascertain just what it was Vitka had found. And at that moment Vitka tossed it a piece of sausage. The bear gobbled up the sausage like a starving mongrel. Vitka threw it another piece, and the bear again gobbled it up and waited for the next portion. But there was nothing left to throw. And anyway, Vitka thought, the bear had to get used to him, and not to the handouts. He did not want to make a beggar of it. Vitka sat down on the damp ground. After the sausage the bear lost its interest in the grass and wandered off towards the taiga. Vitka trailed along at a safe distance behind. Suddenly the bear broke into a run, leaving Vitka quite a distance behind. Only near the taiga did the animal slow down once again to a walk, and it soon vanished among the trees.

Not overly crestfallen that the bear had run away, Vitka strode cheerfully through the tundra, pleased that he had established contact. Now he would have to strengthen this contact during the next encounter.

But afterwards, despite the many long hours he spent roaming about the area, it was only when the bear again visited the hut that Vitka succeeded in meeting up with it again. The bear approached cautiously, stopping now and again to prick its ears and sniff the air. It circled around the hut, so as to approach from downwind. Finally it sat down, afraid to venture any closer, and then raised up on its hind legs... It was the same bear—Vitka knew it by sight. One of its ears was torn.

Vitka stood a small distance from the hut on a path which might have been man-made or trampled out by bears. The bear came to a halt about thirty paces away. The animal's paws, it appeared, were not straight, but slanted inward, just as crooked as two branches shooting out from the fork of a pine tree which had been severed off at the top while still young. These powerful paws seemed to grow directly out of the animal's neck, as if the bear had no chest at all—only these powerful, shaggy paws. The bear pricked up its ears, and its black nose with its dilated nostrils sucked in the air so as to understand: what kind of creature was this which had taken up residence just next to his territory.

It seemed as if it might have recognized Vitka and began assiduously sniffing the grass stalks, as if suddenly very interested in their smell. Now he no longer looked at the man, as if he wasn't there at all.

Vitka shoved his hand into his pocket and pulled

out some lumps of sugar, but was afraid of directly approaching the bear. He took several steps to the side, approached somewhat closer, and then turned in another direction and again came a bit closer to the bear. When the bear began showing clear signs of agitation, he lightly tossed it a lump of sugar. The bear almost recoiled, but then immediately became interested in the bright white chunk beside its paw, sniffed it and ate it with obvious relish. Vitka tossed over another lump. He was about to take another step towards the bear, but it turned around and headed off into the grass. There it stood up on its hind legs, clearly waiting for another treat. Vitka had only a small supply of sugar. And he was in no hurry to give him all of it yet because he did not want to accustom the bear to handouts beside the hut. The animal, standing on its hind legs, growled gently, mildly, as if it were stating its name: "R-e-m."

And so the bear became known as Rem.

It was almost as if Vitka had not been the first person from whom Rem had received handouts. In any case, the bear was clearly in no hurry to leave. He raised himself to full height and, standing like a human, examined Vitka from behind a small shrub. He scratched his side thoughtfully with his claws, and shifted from one leg to the other and raised his front paws to his chest, like a boxer assuming his stance—it was more comfortable to hold his unoccupied paws in this way. Vitka remained perfectly still. Then the bear dropped down on all fours, ambled over to an alder tree and began to scratch his sides against the trunk, drawing his whole body quite far back and forth. Then he rub-

bed his snout along the trunk, driving away the mosquitoes, and once again stood up on his hind legs. Just as around Vitka, there was a cloud of mosquitoes swarming around Rem, and they tormented the bear no less. He constantly swatted them from his muzzle, first with one paw, then the other; scratched his sides with his powerful curved claws.

Vitka tossed him another lump of sugar, and this happened just at the instant when Rem had raised a paw to drive the mosquitoes from his forehead. The bear immediately ate the sugar and repeated the same movement of his paw. Vitka threw him another lump, and once again, after eating the sugar, Rem waved his paw, making a motion very similar to that of a person when he beckons to someone. Rem had made the association: if he waved his paw he would receive sugar. Vitka did not want to destroy this accidentally created conditioned reflex and after each wave of the paw threw the bear sugar until it was all gone.

No longer receiving any treats, Rem headed closer to the hut, stumbled onto an old campfire site, licked up the ashes and turned and headed for the taiga.

Vitka was astonished at how badly the mosquitoes tormented the bear. The animal scratched one side and then the other against tree trunks, waved them off with its paws, rubbed its muzzle against the grass, trying to get rid itself of the clinging insects...

Little by little Rem ceased to fear Vitka. He grew bolder and began to visit the hut more often. Vitka always gave him some small treat—but sparingly, so as not to accustom him to begging for handouts—just enough to keep him interested.

At the same time Vitka was afraid that the bear might take it into its head to find itself a more substantial meal and undertake another raid of the hut, strewing about herbarium collections in passing. Therefore, when he knew he would be away from the hut for some period of time, he ran a thick copper wire through the iron door handle and wound it around a sturdy spike nailed into the doorjamb. And just so no enticing smells would assail the bear's nostrils from underneath the door, Vitka sprinkled fine tobacco or mustard powder over the threshold...

...Once at the edge of the flood plain and the stone birch taiga in a mosaic of light and shade created by the tall grass he spotted a familiar bear's muzzle. It was Rem. The second he noticed Vitka he waved his paw, soliticing a handout. Someone once wrote that bears in every zoo know how easily people are trained: they simply extend their paw and are immediately rewarded with a treat.

It turns out that wild bears quickly master this trick too. All Rem had to do was wave his paw and he would receive some sugar.

Vitka followed Rem through the stone birch forest.

Rem stopped aside a bear path and sniffed it and then sat down on one side as if he simply wanted to take a rest. He paid no attention to Vitka. After sitting for a while, he got up and continued along through the grass. The grass almost completely concealed the bear. Whenever he encountered a fallen branch Rem would stop and, using it for support, raise himself up and

look around. Stretching his long neck he would raise his reddish brown head up above the grass, sniffing and peering around, and then would drop down on all fours and amble along further.

He came to a stream and headed at once towards the bend where the water came pouring out forcefully against the bank and had made a deep depression. The bear sat down beside the hole and watched for a long time as the loaches spun by in this small whirlpool. Then he lay down on his belly and began slowly dipping his paw into the water... When this had no result he dropped his paw down deeper and began to wait, his ears slightly pressed to his head. He continued to lie this way for a long time, until suddenly he jerked his paw in the water—but again he came up with nothing. Rem raised himself up and shook his paws the way a cat will do when it accidentally steps into a puddle. Then he walked away from the water. He ascended a steep slope, passed between the dark green patches of the dwarf Siberian pine and, as if entering a cabin, made his way into a sheltered spot beneath a fallen tree trunk. The split trunk and the dwarf pine formed a cozy little corner where the bear had obviously slept more than once, judging from the broken branches and matted down wood dust. Rem lay down on his belly and rested his head on his folded paws. Vitka stood up a small distance away and watched the bear. Rem was somewhat disturbed by the close proximity of the man and, without changing his pose, opened his eyes from time to time and peered out at him.

Vitka was so close to the bear that he could have taken an excellent photograph. But unfortunately, he

no longer had his camera. Even before he had become acquainted with Rem Vitka had rigged his camera up on a path so that the bear would snap a shot of himself at close range. Once Vitka had arrived at the path to find that the camera had actually taken a shot. But it had not been an occasion to rejoice: in one day's time the young goat's-beard had grown so that its leaves had covered the lens.

Then Vitka had cut down all the grass near the camera, convinced that if the bear showed up again he would get an excellent shot. But the bear, passing along the path, was either attracted by the click of the shutter or by the sight of the uncamouflaged camera... In short, when towards evening Vitka returned to the path, the camera was no longer in place. The bear had knocked it down together with its portable tripod, and after rolling it through the grass for some time, had whacked it with its paw. The camera's plastic housing was quickly transformed into a pile of black broken shards...

Rem dozed in his shelter, but the mosquitoes gave him no peace. He got up and began his bear's exercise routine. For the first exercise, he arched his spine and stretched out. For the second—he stretched first his right, then his left leg out backwards. And to finish up— he sat down and arched his muzzle up and back, trying to reach his back with his head with the split ear...

That evening Vitka lit his small stove and placed the teakettle on to boil. While the water was heating up he lay down contentedly on the bunk. It was pleasant to lie in the hut, in this cozy little island surrounded by

wild, untouched nature.

"How good it would be to really tame Rem," Vitka mused. "The famous Thor Heyerdahl had kept a tame bear cub. In the evenings it would sit on a bench in front of the fireplace and eat supper with the children. Each night they bathed it, just like their own children. When the cub got bigger Thor used it as a pillow... How wonderful if I could train Rem to be just as obedient as Bouquet."

The next day he did not go out into the taiga. He was waiting for the arrival by boat of Sergei Nikolayevich and Galina Dmitriyevna. He put the herbarium collection in order, straightened up the hut, and then sat down by the window so as to be able to see the estuary and not miss the arrival of the boat.

Recently in a journal of scientific abstracts Vitka had read of a project worked out by scientists of the University of Maryland, whereby fifty polar bears were to be fitted with special collars with miniature radio transmitters mounted inside. The radio signals would be transmitted to the artificial satellite Nimbus, which had been launched on a polar orbit of the Earth. By these radio signals the scientists would be able to learn of the migrations of the polar bears.

"Now that's doing things on a big scale," Vitka thought. "Next year I'll absolutely have to enroll in a university so I'll be able to get involved in some serious work. I can start now to prepare myself in all subjects for the entrance exams."

He was ready to sit right down in the hut over his textbooks and spend every free moment cramming for his examinations. But he had brought no text-

books with him.

All around was the dull whine of mosquitoes. Even inside the hut Vitka was forced to use a repellent cream. All the cracks were blocked up, but still they kept slipping in from somewhere. Vitka happened to glance over at a tiny hole in the door left by a missing nail, not much thicker than an ordinary pin, and saw a scrunched up mosquito come crawling through. It was incomprehensible how it could have pushed its tiny legs through this faintly illuminated hole. But once again an insect's proboscis came poking through, followed by a formless grey lump which suddenly spread out wings and flew up towards the ceiling.

Vitka filed down a matchstick and shoved it in the hole. Then he began examining the window to see whether the mosquitoes could be getting in along the edges of the newly mounted pane. And at that moment the door of the hut burst open beneath the blows of paws! Vitka jumped back towards the bunk, but Bouquet threw himself on his chest and began nuzzling him, poking his nose into his eye with such force that he saw stars.

Vitka had missed the arrival of the boat. Sergei Nikolayevich walked from the shore dragging a long rope in order to tether the boat to a thick tree trunk. Vitka rushed out to help carry in the supplies, but just as he stepped onto the stern and grabbed a knapsack the boat, which was large and heavy, went plunging like a horse out of the water directly towards Sergei Nikolayevich and Galina Dmitriyevna. They jumped aside in horror, and the sudden jolt sent Vitka flying into the water...

This is what had actually happened: Rem, totally unsuspecting, had been walking along the river bank. Hearing Bouquet behind him, he had broken into a run and had struck full force against the rope to which the boat was tethered, sending it flying out of the water.

The next day Vitka left for the settlement. He regretted having to leave Rem, fearing the bear would not remember him later. But a helicopter was flying from the settlement to the Valley of Geysers, and Vitka was being sent to put up signs requesting the tourists not to damage the geyserites. Any other time he would have gladly flown to the famous valley, but now, after making friends with Rem, he did not want to leave the hut...

THE VALLEY OF GEYSERS

The helicopter descended for a landing. Beneath them, crumpled by the wind, the grass rippled out in undulating green waves.

A bear cub came tearing out from behind a clump of dwarf alder trees. The propeller blades had barely come to a stop and Vitka jumped to the ground and rushed after it.

"More to the right ... keep to the right! " the pilot shouted.

Vitka ran out onto a steep, almost precipitous slope, but the cub had vanished into the thickets. And so he had missed the opportunity of getting a closer look at it.

Below a white fountain of water and steam jetted up

from the earth. In the distance was another, and further on a whole group of fountains sparkled in the sun. This was the famous Valley of Geysers. Vitka could not tear his eyes from the sight, and the crew began shouting from the helicopter for him to come and get his signs.

The helicopter flew off. Vitka lifted onto his shoulder the bundle of signs which, nailed onto light stakes, resembled snow shovels, and began his descent into the valley. This was the valley of the Geyser River which rushed below. Spurting up here and there were jets of water and steam, as if smoking campfires. Small round patches of water shone like small lakes. The color of their water was startling—in one it was black, in another light blue, while in a third it was light green. And there was also yellow water, and red, and even a color so unusual it was difficult to imagine what its sources were—something like the color of a stormy sky at sunset.

Vitka descended along a worn path which had turned with time into a narrow channel along which water from melting snow and rain flowed through the tall grasses. There were no tracks on the path, and only on the soft earth at the very bottom of the valley did Vitka find distinct bear paw prints. They had been made by two animals of different sizes—one large and the other medium in size.

At the valley bottom the grass was much shorter than on the slope. Some spots were totally bare—brown bald patches, as if ashes had been scattered.

It was frightening to walk along the hot ground around fissures which were vents for gases and steam.

Vitka had heard many times that there were places in the valley where the ground could cave in above boiling liquid clay, which would instantly scald your legs.

A slight wind drove clouds of steam from a shallow gully. Two black pits yawned at its bottom, two terrifying funnels which led into an abyss. A terrible roar resounded from them, similar to the roar of a lion, but of one as huge as ten elephants put together. Vitka realized that he was standing beside the apertures known as gryphons from which from time to time the scalding water of the mighty geysers would come shooting out. He backed up hastily, afraid of being suddenly scalded by a geyser.

"Maybe I should get further away?" he thought in panic. "Who knows just how far the water might shoot out."

But the grass beneath his feet was green, which meant that boiling water would not fall in this spot. Otherwise it would have burnt up the grass long ago, the way everything had been burnt away on the rocky area on the other side of the crater.

He continued on, trying to keep to patches or little islands of grass. A thin stream of steam rose up from behind some rocks. Suddenly it tore upwards in a column and soon water began to gush out. It rose higher and higher—and soon from the rock bed a powerful jet gushed upwards to a height fifteen times that of a man. It was so similar to a fountain that Vitka had no difficulty in guessing that this was in fact the famous Fountain—one of the most beautiful of the geysers.

An extraordinary diversity of color prevailed all around. Right at Vitka's feet stretched a strip of white

clay. A bit further was a patch of blue clay. Further still was an outcrop of yellow. But it was the vivid, amazing colors of the geyserites which were the most startling. Around the gryphons of the large geysers, from which from time to time steam and hot water was ejected, pulsated a multitude of small springs. Over the period of thousands of years the water, rich in mineral salts, had created fantastically shaped rock deposits—geyserites. Emerald, yellow and pearly white patches glittered from beneath the hot water which trickled over them. It flowed into a rapid-flowing bluish river—the Geyser River.

From time to time from the depths of the earth there was a sound as like that of a train thundering past, and the current of the river picked up intensity.

Vitka had only to find a spot for the last sign, which called upon the tourists to "preserve the wonders of nature—geyserites". He walked up on a hillock covered with young birch trees. A small path stood out clearly among the tall grasses. He followed along the path and came out to a large round pit in which liquid clay was seething and squelching. It sank in some places, and in others it rose up towards the edges, forming great reddish-yellow bubbles which burst and, boiling up, splashed out over the edge. All around was green grass and young birch saplings, and it seemed as if there couldn't be anything more behind them than a cheerful forest glade. But instead there was a terrifying, gaping pit with eternally bubbling clay.

There were surprises at almost every step. Vitka stumbled upon a small mud volcano. It barely reached knee-height, but it looked like a real, erupting volcano.

In a crater the size of a cup liquid mud seethed like lava.

And nearby in a narrow black hole in a rocky slab the water of a geyser seethed and boiled. In such boiling gryphons the natives of New Zealand, where there are also geysers, used to boil fish. And here in the valley tourists boiled potatoes in net shopping bags.

A vast canyon was surrounded by mountains densely covered with dwarf Siberian pine, which at their very peaks rose abruptly into steep walls. From one of these a small waterfall cascaded down in a narrow white band. The stream of water fell from the height of a twenty-storey building. A raven flew along the steep walls of the canyon, on the alert for some animal which might have slipped from the steep edge.

Vitka pounded the stake into the ground with all his might, trying to drive it in deep. The stake sank smoothly into the ground. Hot steam rose up from the hole in the earth... Yet all around grass was growing, and a distance away there were even birches, and nothing gave any indication of the fact that beneath a thin crust of earth seethed dangerous liquid clay.

Vitka stepped back, carefully planting each step. Before his eyes was a boiling liquid mash in a hole. And if he were to accidentally stumble into such slush, there would be no way of getting out of the valley.

Such a thing had happened with some of the carefree tourists. They would spy a pretty flower somewhere and leave the path despite the warnings, and then they would be carried off on makeshift stretchers to the helicopter pad.

Vitka looked closely down at the ground and noticed

an unusual grey lump near his feet. At first he did not know what to make of it and took a few steps towards it, but the lump jumped up and, with a flurry of paws scurried upwards along the path. It was a young hare. It scampered off keeping exactly to the path—afraid of burning its paws. The earth where the hare had been lying was warmed by underground heat, like a well-heated stove.

There was a strong smell of sulphur in the air. Steam poured up from the geysers, gases hissed as they rose up from beneath the ground through fumaroles, while a yellow wagtail hopped along the hot ground and a scarlet finch chirped in a nearby bush. These quite usual birds and animals had taken up residence in this most extraordinary valley.

Vitka was examining a red geyserite similar to the color of a coral when a stream of boiling water a yard wide came spurting out of a black grotto in a cliff—it did not shoot upwards, but parallel to the ground, pouring out steam and roaring right in front of his face! Vitka took off running, now unmindful of where his feet might land. Later he learned that he had been frightened by one of the most dangerous of geysers, called Stove for its vent which resembled the stoking hole of a Russian stove.

Vitka kept running until he reached a grassy knoll, where he sat down to catch his breath. He accidentally struck his leg against the ground and a rumble resounded along the knoll. It turned out that Vitka had not made his way to a knoll at all, but onto an unusual, as almost everything in this valley was, earthen dome, beneath which, most likely, boiled liquid clay

or water. He placed his ear over the dome and heard a gurgling sound below, just the same as that which emanated from the yawning pits, like devil's cauldrons, all around. Vitka climbed down cautiously, afraid of caving in the dome, and hastily made his way over to the safe, well-trodden path...

Before leaving the valley Vitka turned around for one last look. The geyser Fountain rose up majestically, spreading its beautiful water wings.

Vitka walked out to the helicopter pad. The Valley of Geysers was now far below. From the other side of the valley came a sound like thunder. Perhaps a mountain sheep had brushed against a stone and it had carried others along with it, sending a whole avalanche of rocks sliding below.

From time to time the air resounded with the hissing of large geysers, and columns of steam shone blindingly white in the sun. Vitka looked with awe at the valley and thought regretfully that for the major part of the year no one ever saw this fantastic beauty.

The helicopter was already due to land. But when after a while it still hadn't shown up, Vitka walked off to take a look at the hollow which bordered on the valley. He walked to the edge and froze—below, breathing heavily, stood a large bear. Small wounds were visible on its sides and muzzle. Nearby sat a she-bear. It was clear that the bear had received its wounds in a fight with other males: this was the bears' mating season. An encounter now with an ill-tempered bear would be dangerous. Vitka hid behind a dwarf Siberian pine.

The female was almost twice as small as the male, so

it had probably been their tracks which Vitka had spotted in the valley. The grass on the slope was etched through with paths, and in many spots there were trampled down areas. The male headed towards the she-bear, and she ran off, he in pursuit. The animals ran so freely through the dwarf pines that it was as if they were out in the open: paths had been cleared through in many spots.

When the male finally caught up with the female, she turned around, and the powerful animal backed up, afraid of receiving a box on the ears for his importunity. Finally growing tired, he descended to a stream, waded into the water and stood there for a long time, shaking his head.

"So he decided to take time out to treat his wounds!" Vitka realized, and suddenly recalled how during the winter he had gone to Hot Springs, which were most likely connected by underground streams to the Valley of Geysers.

Then he had fallen accidentally into a warm stream and had taken off his clothes. When up to his neck in water he had reached the hut in the upper reaches of the hollow, he had startled half out of his wits the old man who had come out to meet him. Once inside the hut, when Vitka told him what had really happened, the old man had said disappointedly:

"I thought maybe you were some kind of sports fanatic. You never know what young folk will do these days."

Vitka covered himself up in some old clothes which the man had long since discarded and walked out to get his clothes.

"Where can I dry them?" he asked, not seeing a stove in the hut.

"There's no stove," the old man confirmed. "We get our heat from the spring. From the hottest one—the water flows by gravity through the radiators and pours out through the other end. It's not too hot and not too cold."

Along the wall behind some cots were hot water pipes. This hut had been built by the local fishery, and fishermen came here in their leisure time to swim or take treatment in the hot mineral water.

"It was no Kamchatkan built this hut," the old man grumbled. "A seasonal worker of some sort. He built the door to open outward. Nobody on the Kamchatka makes doors like that. Once it got stuck in a big snowdrift and I had to move the cots and take a running jump at the door. It took forty-six tries before I finally got it open."

The old man watched carefully out of the corner of his eye to see what Vitka was pulling out of his knapsack for breakfast. When Vitka had set the empty knapsack aside, he gave a heavy sigh and thought: "He's still a youngster."

The old man had a special liking for his bottle: he threaded the cork from emptied wine bottles onto strings, and these hung like garlands from the ceiling in the corner above his cot. In the settlement they laughed and joked about him.

He had a bluish-grey nose and beneath his nose and on his cheeks there was such a bristle that it was as if some mischievous fisherman had clipped some fishing line into bits and pinned it all over the old man's face.

Steam rose up over the hollow. When a breeze cleared it away, the water was clearly visible. It fell from small ledges, and its cascades sparkled in the sun.

"Somewhere far off in an underground cave there must be a heat source which warms this water," Vitka had thought then. "Usually, if water is hot, it's because someone has heated it. But this water flows up from beneath the earth, where it has been heated, for centuries."

The old man gave a detailed account of the healing properties of these springs:

"There's a hunter in Tumanovo. He caught sick and both his arms and legs were paralyzed. They brought him here on a sledge. And when he left, he went on his own, on skis. About forty years ago they cured lepers at that spring over there. I cured myself of rheumatism... Once a bear took off the top of a man's scalp. He lay all torn up for three days. He was barely alive when they found him. And afterwards the only visible mark left was a scar on the back of his head. Everything healed."

The old man thought he could detect a shade of doubt in Vitka's eyes.

"When our new doctor first got here he didn't believe in the water's powers either. But then when he couldn't cure his patients himself, he began sending them to the springs, as an experiment. He's a professional doctor, yet the water cured patients that he couldn't. Now you can read his articles about the springs in the paper."

The old man fell silent and then said offendedly:

"Others complain: 'The water doesn't help.' They

come on a Sunday, take a few dips and think they've cured all their ailments. Even a great specialist wouldn't have been able to cure them right away. It's only the young kids whose scratches and cuts are healed by the springs in one day's time, like the water of life. But with a serious ailment you have to thoroughly warm your body and sweat it out. And they never have enough time—always too busy. There was a family lived here before me. They raised chickens. The chickens would wade out into the shallow spots and stand there. A she-bear used to come around with her cub. All hunched up like a cane handle. One evening the family goes out for a swim and the bear is sitting there in the stream. The women all squeal and go running back. But it all comes down to one thing—the water has healing properties. No animal would just sit there for no good reason."

Clearly disappointed that there wasn't even a small flask of brandy in Vitka's knapsack, the old man recalled:

"This water doesn't take kindly to drunks," he said, nodding towards the springs. "If someone, God forbid, wanders in while they're tipsy – they'll die of a heart attack or a stroke. That's happened more than once..."

...In the meantime the bear began to make his way out of the stream and the she-bear, who all this time had been lazily nibbling the grass, took off running up along the slope of the hollow.

It was interesting to observe the bears, but now they were running quite close to Vitka.

"Enough... Enough..." He told himself. "Everything has its limit. I should leave quietly the same way I came. There's not a rifle or a single tree around." But still he stood there, arguing with himself: "You decided not to be afraid, so why are you panicking? Walk away from a bear chase?! How many have had an opportunity to see something like that?"

Suddenly the bear ran over towards Vitka—it had heard him move. All the blood rushed from Vitka's face, but he remained perfectly motionless—there was nowhere to run. Suspecting a rival, the animal approached him resolutely, but then stopped, lifted up its nose as if it were sniffing the sky, and stood up on its hind legs. Vitka froze, afraid to breathe, but his legs felt as if they were on springs, ready to cast him aside and run... And just then the helicopter came whirring overhead. Closer! .. Closer! .. The bear rushed towards a dwarf Siberian pine, taking great bounds as if leaping over ocean waves. The female went bounding friskily behind.

"What are you trying to do, playing shepherd here or something?" the pilot asked.

But Vitka had lost all sense of humor. He climbed up into the helicopter, sat down in a corner and fell silent... Below the valley carried on with its miraculous work. Suddenly a jet of water came spurting up from beneath the earth. At first a few yards high. Then a stream the thickness of a truck began to soar skyward, and a column of water and steam raised up above the valley and stretched to the clouds. This was the geyser Giant bristling from its underground cave.

SALMON RUN

Already for several days now from the high rocky promontories you could see shoals of salmon passing along the bank. The fish made their way through the seals' barriers at the mouths of the river and passed into the fresh water in order to give birth to their countless progeny, and themselves to perish immediately in their spawning grounds. In years when the fish were very plentiful the water in some streams of the preserve became so inundated with the decaying remains of the fish that it was unfit to drink. Without these remains the young fish hatching from the roe would perish of hunger in the lifeless, almost distilled water which flowed from the mountain snows. Vitka walked along the banks of the river which was about 50 yards wide and not very deep, but so swift that breakers continually churned in long billows above the rock beds.

The entire channel was black with the fins and spines of the fish coming in to spawn. It was difficult to make them out properly among the foaming manes, and Vitka found a small backwater where behind snags the water was calmer.

The large, greyish-blue fish did not move towards the current, but hovered in one spot. From time to time they would raise up to the surface and exchange places with other fish of the shoal. A foot and a half long and even larger, they almost touched one another. The backs of those at a greater depth seemed green.

The water coursed noisily along the river channel. The river curled and foamed above the rocks. It was

amazing how all the fish could remain almost perfectly motionless in such rapid water.

Voracious loaches lurked behind fallen branches right by the bank. They darted into the river to feed on the salmon roe. Red spots glowed vividly on their dark backs.

Vitka walked several miles along the river—everywhere the water teemed with the salmon. There were five, seven salmon to one square yard.

And this whole mass of fish was soon to perish. It had come to the river in order, for the first and only time in its life, to deposit its spawn and to perish, thereby providing food for the multitude of its young.

Vitka wanted to see the funnels which the fish made with their tails. The Chinook salmon, for example, dig up funnel-shaped holes in the river bottom about two feet in depth and deposit their roe in them... But the pebbly bottom was smooth everywhere. It was still too early for the fish which had come to the stream to make holes for their roe.

Fish jaws, heads and tails were frequently washed up on the bank.

Behind a clump of bushes Vitka saw out of the corner of his eye a suspicious movement—the stalks of the goat's-beard separated and a bear appeared. It had crossed over from the opposite bank in search of a fishing spot.

Vitka was a bit shaken by the size of the animal.

The bear waded into the water and raised up to a half-squatting position on its hind legs. Its front paws were ready to strike out. It looked intently into the water and from time to time followed with its eyes the

fish swimming a bit further away. With a sudden, imperceptible blow of its paw it plucked a salmon from the water, took it into its mouth and carried it onto the bank where it began to crunch on it. Although it ate unhurriedly, it made short work of the fish and waded into the water once again.

Vitka continued on a little further down the bank and found what he had been searching for—Rem's tracks. He wanted to observe his friend during the salmon run.

Noticing Vitka, Rem made a large semicircle around him, stopped for a second to sniff his tracks and only then seemed to cease paying attention to him. He was quite familiar with Vitka.

Rem hunted beside the rapids where there were especially great numbers of fish. Just as the other bear, Rem waded into the water, partially raised himself up on his hind legs, and immediately pulled a large fish out of the water. He held it in the claws of one paw just as dexterously as a person would have held a large fish in his fingers. And just as the other bear, he took it in his jaws and climbed out onto the bank. But instead of eating it immediately, he threw it down and once again descended into the stream.

The fish thrashed around on the bank and flopped along the slope towards the water. Rem glanced at it and again fixed his gaze on the water. The fish moved again. Then Rem climbed back out of the water, flung the fish further up on the bank with his paw, stood for a second as if deliberating, and then walked over once again and bit into the fish's back. Only then did he return to the stream. But just then a wolverene trotted

out onto the bank. Rem jumped out of the water and bounded over to the fish, the fur on the scruff of his neck bristling. But the wolverene trotted along on its way, as if not even noticing the bear. Even back in the water, Rem was obviously still disturbed, and looked from time to time at the thickets into which the wolverene had disappeared.

One after the other he caught two more fish and carried them like the first onto the bank. Rem was apparently full and was either fishing for pleasure's sake or in order to make provisions.

Two black crows perched near the fish. Rem saw them but made no effort to chase them away—he knew that it was useless.

Just ahead beyond the bend in the stream the crows had set up a raucous din. There the other bear was fishing, and from time to time loud splashes could be heard.

It seemed to Vitka that these splashes were getting closer. Rem had almost ceased his fishing and now looked often in the direction of the bend. He was clearly agitated. Suddenly he jumped up sharply on his hind legs and pricked his ears. Vitka also noticed the difference in the sound of the stream. Only to the uninitiated does it seem that a stream makes the same noise everywhere. Actually, each section has its own voice. At the spot where Vitka and Rem were standing, the water was the loudest by a fallen willow. It grew calmer at the bend, but it thundered out at the shoal and branched out at the willow's roots with a hiss in different directions. But just as soon as a new sound appeared among these familiar ones, Rem was imme-

diately on the alert. He stretched out, standing on his hind legs, and tried to make out the newcomer, around whose paws the water sounded differently.

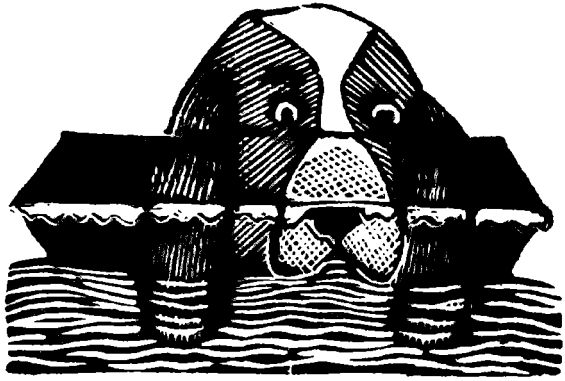
Above the bank, behind a bend in the stream appeared the heavy, dark brown back of the bear. Its head was lowered towards the water and was not visible. Rem jumped out on the bank and, hunching down, ran off into the grass. Vitka looked around and then rushed after Rem.

At a spot way above the place from where the large bear had driven them away, Rem descended into the stream and, as it seemed to Vitka, for no reason at all began heading downstream. The water here was up to his belly. Sending out great sheets of spray, Rem raced about 70 yards down the stream until he came out onto a shoal. In front of him in the low water churned the frightened fish. He seized one in his mouth and carried it onto the bank. It seems that this noisy run downstream to the shoal was one method of catching fish. They had to be driven into shallow water.

Rem ate the front part of the fish and tossed aside the rest.

Sniffing the tracks of the bears which had passed along the path before him, Rem wandered on further. In order not to lose sight of him, Vitka decided to cross the shoal to the other side of the stream. But just as he stepped into the water, Rem appeared from behind a bend. Vitka stopped. Without taking his eyes from him, the bear stepped into the water and suddenly charged full speed down the stream towards him. Frightened by such a turn of affairs, Vitka lost all presence of mind. He had no inkling of what to do...

"Am I really going to have to shoot?" he thought in alarm. But he could never have shot at Rem... Vitka stood there, as white as the spray flying up from beneath the paws of the bear which was racing towards him... The animal came to a stop just a small distance away. A fish frightened by the bear was darting around on the shoal right at Vitka's feet. Rem reluctantly struck it with his paw, and the stunned fish crashed headfirst into the sand, thrashing its tail. Rem climbed back out onto the bank, shook himself off, gave Vitka a disgruntled look and ambled off down the path. It looked as though Rem was displeased that Vitka had not struck the water with his paws, hadn't snatched up the fish which he had sent him. Rem had apparently decided that Vitka had stepped into the stream to fish, and had driven the fish towards him the way young bears fishing together will sometimes do...



Homecoming*

It's not noon yet, and I'm already in Roomassaare. I decided against the bus and walked. Haven't shaved or combed my hair in three days—left my comb at home. One sort of feels ashamed of showing a mug like this in a bus and sitting down beside decent people. The distance between Kingissepp and Roomassaare is less than between two holidays, and a strong man like me covers five kilometres before he's smoked a couple of cigarettes.

And so I'm in Roomassaare. The mail launch from Abruka is bobbing at the pier, its red handrails shining in the sun like a perch's fins. It's an hour's wait before departure, people are not back from town yet. So

* English translation ©Raduga Publishers 1986

much the better, or they'd pester me with questions: where've you been, Kaspar, and why're you as bristly as a bear-hunter? And the women are the worst—they just can't figure a man out. Women will always be women, come flood or earhquake.

So I'll go down into the cabin and have a snooze till my dear fellow-villagers turn up. It's a bit cooler downstairs: it may be August, but the sun has been doing its damnedest to fry us. What kind of huge atoms must it have inside it to have been giving off light and heat non-stop for millions of years! And free, too. For each and every one. For you and me. And perhaps some other planet-dwellers as well, for they say there is no end to the Universe, just like to the prayer of an old maid. One thing is clear to me, they don't use plain old firewood up there. That's for sure!

Lord almighty! What is this? A coffin? A brand-new beauty of a coffin standing right there in the cabin. Has somebody gone to his last home? But who? I don't know of anybody dying on us all of a sudden. Abruka is a small island, not much bigger than a sprat's head, you can't keep anything secret on it. If a horse loses a shoe, or, say, a cow breaks a horn, there is more talk than at a confessional. Perhaps the hour has really come for somebody to shuffle off, but when we're having such a sunny spell of hot August weather, when you're feeling chipper in body and soul, the idea is, as they say in the newspapers, not topical. Not topical at all. At this time the sea is still warm and gentle, and plaice caught on the sand bank melts in your mouth, the fields shine golden, and it's so nice all around that your very spine tingles. At the sight of such blessedness

death itself should turn back and go the way it has come.

Take Malli from the Saviauk farmstead for instance: she's over ninety, but does she think of dying? Not she! Some time ago she bought a sack of potatoes, and now you can be sure she won't turn her face to the wall until she has eaten the very last spud. When her late husband, old Juuljus was dying and had all but given up the ghost, he laughed so that the bedstead shook, yelling how he would gloat in the grave watching Malli going to all that expense on his funeral. How d'you like that? They were both so mean that they never had a child in all their ninety years.

Well, never mind Malli and her old man, those are memoirs, but who is this coffin for? In autumn, and towards the end of winter, when it's hard to reach Abruka, they do sometimes bring in coffins in advance, so to speak. Really and truly! In the old days we didn't have a graveyard in Abruka and the stiffs were kept in a threshing-barn for weeks sometimes, waiting till the ice melted in the channel and they could make their last trip across it. Well, after all, a dead man is in no hurry.

It's a good coffin though.

I wouldn't mind lying a while in such a coffin myself.

Why not look and see what's inside this Christian's last abode? Not bad at all! A clean lining and a little pillow filled with wood-shavings. Yes... I wonder how it feels lying in a coffin while you're still alive? Shall I try? I have to take my shoes off, naturally. It's a coffin, after all, not a pigsty. I'll stuff my shoes in my

pockets. Like this. Naturally, I'd feel more comfortable lying on my side. I always sleep on my right side. But I've never seen a dead man lying on his side in a coffin, and I've attended quite a few funerals, let me tell you. It's not proper. I may be from Abruka, but that doesn't mean I'm something special. In a shop in Kingissepp one of us Abrukans may jump the queue if it's a matter of a pack of cigarettes, or a loaf of bread, saying he's in a hurry for the launch, off on an overseas voyage, so to speak, but in a coffin we shall all lie nice and proper on our backs.

By the way, my son-in-law, the one that lives in Tallinn, told me an interesting fact when I went to visit them. He, my son-in-law, had just come back from France, and he said they didn't do so badly there, but capitalists will be capitalists, they even try to save on space for dead folk and put the coffins upright in the graves. So the French stiffs are lined up in their graves like soldiers on parade.

Well, it's not bad in here. A bit on the cramped side, but a good fit on the whole. I wonder who it is for. Well, never mind, I'll have me a lie-down here and a think. Only I must put the lid on, so that nobody sees a grown man playing a fool like this. And it will keep the flies off too. I think I am safe for an hour's snooze, nobody will come before departure time.

Yes... My son-in-law also told me another story about French stiffs. A certain Jacques or Louis, he said, had to be moved to another cemetery, and in his lifetime he was a real gay dog. Well, so they opened the grave, but the coffin was empty, just a note, saying: "*I'm with Mary, the third grave on the left, shall be*

back soon." My daughter started yelling her head off, like somebody stepped on her corns: "All you men have a screw loose, a body never hears a decent word out of you, it's either dirty stories or racing cars! " I kept my mouth shut, I never went to the Tallinn Polytechnical and I got my education elsewhere. At Velikiye Luki,* as a matter of fact. Yessir. But I don't see as this story about the Frenchman is so very dirty. I think it's quite touching, in fact. Maybe a person had a dream all his life—and dreams don't come true any too often, especially not for our generation what with the road barred by the war and everything. What's wrong if a dream comes true as in a fairy-tale, even if it is the French way? Isn't it true? Children love fairy-tales, but an old person also likes to have his fun. I like that story about Louis very much. There! I've sorted out that one, but the thing that remains unclear is who the coffin is for. To be sure, death will strike at a hale person sometimes, while the sick one goes on living. The ones that go on and on about their ailments don't kick the bucket all that soon. If you stop by the shop and listen, all they talk about is rheumatisms and lumbagoes. They groan all week, but when Sunday comes along there is no one to bury. Trust people after that!

Well, it's certainly a tight fit, this coffin is, not like a double bed, but I feel kind of drowsy. And no wonder. I haven't had any sleep for two days. When you come to Kingissepp, you have no time for sleep.

* An important battle, in which Estonian units of the Soviet Army took part, was fought near the town of Velikiye Luki during the Second World War.—*Ed.*

True, I might have found an hour or two, but my mission was too arduous. Yes, mission, I use the word in its right meaning. It was on account of that mission that I had gone to town. I racked my brains quite a while, and I even came up with a name for my mission: Raksi in memoriam.

It all began that morning when Raksi went to the forest with a double-barrelled gun...

To tell the truth, he was not so young as he used to be.

He was lame—that bite Pauka gave him on the leg just wouldn't heal and was festering. What didn't we try—all kinds of ointments. And Raksi himself kept licking it all the time. You know, a dog's tongue has ninety-nine medicines on it. But none of it helped. I thought I'd have to call in the vet Kõll again. He had operated on Raksi when Pauka bit him that first time. And he did it so well, Raksi was up and about for Irma's heat. He cantered off like a proper stud, his nose held high. Only he soon had another fight with Pauka, again on account of Valli... Well, Valli is certainly worth fighting for; in the good old days men, too, used to fight over worthwhile wenches. But can you call it a proper fight, when one is a wolf and the other a dog? Even though he is a unique dog, he's still a dog. I tried to hammer it into his head in the morning, going to the pier, and in the evening, on our way back I had another talk with Raksi. He seemed to understand, for there's never been a dog on Abruka to match Raksi in brains. He understood, whimpered, nodded his head, promised to keep it in mind, but as soon as Valli was in heat again all his doggy reason was

blown to kingdom come. Yes, it's always like this. When a dog gets crazy with love, he'll attack a tank, to say nothing of a wolf. Nature knows what she is about, and if she made Raksi that way, that's how he has to be. Who am I to reproach him? Are people any better? Remember your own young days and add up all your amours. I've had my share of love's joys and griefs, and that's a fact. My sins would take some counting. There would have been even more if not for the Fritzes busting up our life. So I understand Raksi very well and don't blame him for his whoring at all. Raksi was a male, and that's all there is to it. But when he began to ail and grew thinner and weaker, his muzzle going grey, Marge told me it was no use calling Kõll in, there was no medicine against old age. To this I argued that abroad they use all sorts of tricks to ward off old age, the women have their faces lifted and their breasts raised sky-high so as to look younger and comelier. "You ought to have your foul mouth stopped with a cow's turd," Marge said to this. She simply can't stand my talk, especially when I've had a couple. It's just fate that Marge, my wife from the Soomi farmstead, should be born a raw-boned and bossy scold and should remain so to her dying day. Amen. That's the way she is.

Well, since she wouldn't let me call the vet, I called a photographer. So Lepp, my photographer pal, came from Kingissepp, and it so happened that a storm broke out and there was no going back. He spent three days on Abruka and made me a pile of first-rate photographs of Raksi. "If they don't hurry me, I make real masterpieces," Lepp boasted, and it is true, too. A

photograph of Raksi is now pinned up in our living-room over the sofa, beside the photos of Luigi and Viire, our daughters. He looks at us from the wall, and with his wise eyes and grey beard he is the spitting image of the American writer Hemingway. The son of our teacher Tuulik, who is a writer too, just gaped when he saw Raksi's portrait and gasped: "A village tragedian! "

That's the kind of masterpiece Lepp made. He told me that after the war he used to take orders for photographs on the telephone. He only asked three questions:

Age?

Hair curly or straight?

Drinker or non-drinker?

And that was enough.

I adore clever and talented people. They should be cherished, and I do cherish them as the apple of my eye. I have three pals in Kingissepp, all talented, the photographer Lepp, the vet Kõll and the undertaker Teemeister. Whenever I come over, we get together for a drink and some rag-chewing. This last time we spent three days together at the Lepp's, discussing Raksi's mission.

Yes, Raksi in memoriam.

A dog like that should have a monument, that's all there is to it. I heard that in Leningrad a famous scientist put up a monument to the dogs on which he had experimented. But a dog for experiments and Raksi are two very different propositions. Raksi was an independent, decent, unique dog. Once in a lifetime every man worth the name has a dog worth the name.

That's what Raksi was. Marge tried bringing some puppies home, but I'd stand in the doorway and command: "Take them away."

No, I don't want any other dog.

It was just fate. I didn't buy him, Marge brought him from the fair in town; they gave him as a kind of bonus, in addition to three piglets.

He was so small nobody would buy him, so they just pushed him into the sack with piglets. A flea he was, not a proper puppy. When Marge pulled him out of the sack he started scurrying at my feet, as nimble as a flea. Honest to God! I picked him up and put him inside my shirt, and he started nosing all over my naked belly, whimpering, probably looking for a teat. And when I pulled him out, he gave such a thin plaintive squeal that I felt a stab in the small of my back. What can you do, you feel sorry for a mite like that. So I pushed him inside my shirt again. And there he grew up, on my naked belly.

Who'd have thought that the puny thing would grow into a prize dog, as shaggy and clever as they come.

And who would save my life too. That time I fell through the ice together with my sled, he dashed off to the village howling fit to wake the dead.

No, I'll never forget that animal.

Makes you feel terribly sad.

That, it does.

This coffin is no sanatorium, I'll tell you that. It looks nice from the outside, but inside there's no room to move. No, I won't stand it long, laid out in a coffin like a dead body, I'll have cricks all over. At a funeral the dear departed is so peaceful and blissful-looking

you think his life's dream has come true. No cricks anywhere. I suppose it has a purpose—that you never find out how nice it is in the grave until you've kicked the bucket yourself. Yes, Nature is a wily wench. When you're alive you have no time to stop and ponder about how good the dead folk have it. You're too busy living. No one would think, looking at Raksi when he was young and healthy that the time would come when his muzzle would become grey and he would limp so badly. It never occurred to me once. Perhaps it did though, but I drove the thought away. And then ten years fled past like a swallow, here one moment and gone the next. And Raksi got old. Old and ill.

Otherwise he'd never had gone into the forest with a gun.

When he was young and strong, he had plenty of other things to do, he had no time to go into the forest with guns.

Raksi was a fisherman's dog.

He used to wake me up before light with a touch of his paw. Sometimes I didn't want to get up, especially during the sprat season, but Raksi would growl and worry me until I pulled my pants on. And how happy he was to get into the motor-bike. He squealed for the entire village to hear, and when we went down into the hollow, he started yapping right and left like a machine-gun, without let-up. He was crazy about those morning rides to the pier. And if for some reason we could not go out to sea, Raksi was disconsolate. He even grew pale all over his face, as though from vitamin deficiency.

By the way, about vitamins...

Oh-oh... vitamins, yes, oh my, vitamins are one of those... oh, hrrrr...

"God almighty, she really went and bought that coffin! "

"Marge has a temper like a young filly."

"If I'm a filly what kind of brute are you?"

"Listen, Marge..."

"I hear you, I'm not deaf."

"When the war ended, we waited years before our men came home... And your Kaspar's only been away for three days, and you've gone and bought a coffin for him."

"What if I have? You can't get at that man any other way."

How d'you like that? My own wedded wife getting a coffin for a living husband. Me, that is. Darling wifey! I'd hug you lovingly until your ribs cracked like a washing-basket, only I can't. If I suddenly jump out of this coffin, half of the gathering will be frightened out of their wits. We'll have to open our own private madhouse on Abruka. I've slept too long, damn it! I should've crawled out of this coffin before my villagers came on board and the boat started on its way. I suppose I'll just have to lie doggo like a silkworm in its cocoon. No, but just imagine doing a thing like that! Stinging nettles, that's what that women is! Carting over a coffin for a living husband—before all the folks! It makes me shiver as if the North Pole is slid-

ing down my back. Damn! To think that it is on her account that I'm going home without completing my mission... If she knew that, she'd wish the earth swallowed her up...

"I say, Marge, let's drop that coffin overboard! "
"Not on your life! "
"He's probably been detained by some business."
"I don't care."
"Kaspar is not one of those skirt-chasers."
"How d'you know? Has he left you high and dry?"

Damn that Marge, and that tongue of hers. Have I really been living with this tarantula for thirty-three years?

"He was mighty fond of that dog, and now he sorrows for it, in his own manner."
"Let him sorrow."
"Last week he was saying to the folks outside the shop that he wants to put up a monument to Raksi."
"He says all kinds of things outside the shop."
"He said that all right, and I didn't hear anything else. 'I'll put up a monument to the dog,' he said, 'for the whole world to gasp.' "
"That's just like him! He'd build a skyscraper for a dog. But you'll never get him to fix a door on the outhouse! "
"Come off it, Marge..."

What, I can't fix up a door on the outhouse? That's a lie, wifey dear. If I feel like it, I'll fix double doors on all the loos on Abruka. But I don't feel like it. I like seeing the whole bright world while I'm sitting there. Thinking, and watching, and smoking a cigarette. The cigarette is important like hell. A session in an outhouse without a cigarette is like a wedding without music. You sit there in peace and quiet, your mind working, your spirit brightening up, your innards getting relieved... What d'you want a door for? To hide what secret doings?

Anyway it's a barefaced lie that I can't hang a door on. We did have a door once. Before Raksi's time. It was because of Raksi that I took it off. I could not sit there with an easy heart and think lofty thoughts when the dog was howling and moaning outside for his incarcerated master. I just couldn't, that's all.

If you give it a thought, a door in an outhouse is a dangerous thing. I had to break such a door down once to save a person's life. That was soon after the war. A theatre company came to Abruka from Kuressaare. Well, I saw one of the actors head for the loo before the show began, so I thought, God help you, better people than you had bowels trouble from stage fright. But he went in and he never came out. He just stayed there. I wondered what was keeping him, so I came close to the door and I heard him muttering in different voices, very melancholy-like: "To be or not to be: that is the question! "

Well, it was a clear case of a man going off his rocker. Suicidal dementia. To be or not to be—will a normal person ask such a question?

So I broke down the door.

And dragged that actor out.

"If you want to hang yourself in the lavatory," I said to him, "do it after the show. Plays happen just about as often here as the eclipse of the sun. And you want to deprive us of this rare ennobling occasion."

Did he rail at me!

"I locked myself up in there, because I was learning Hamlet's soliloquy by heart."

I felt an utter fool. So I apologized, and he just laughed and said, "Oh well, greater sacrifices have been laid on the altar of art than this whitewashed door."

There you are. How could I've known about Hamlet? I can't even remember all the yarns our Abruka men tell...

"And what's wrong with that idea of Kaspar's? Let him put up a monument to Raksi if he wants."

"It's just drunken ravings."

"Kaspar doesn't drink more than the others."

"Have you been toting up every drop he drinks?"

"A man must have a drop of poison in his blood, Marge. Without it he's as slack as a frog in autumn."

"Listen to the clever know-all! "

"Let him put up a monument to Raksi. Some people are not worth a dog's tail while living, but when they die they get a whipping great monument."

She said a true word, Malli did. If I wasn't lying in this coffin, I'd give her a kiss for those kind words,

never mind my harridan of a wife. No, it's no great shakes lying in a coffin. God willing, it won't be my permanent home for a few more years. As for Marge, she'll get what's coming to her. If she didn't get it before, she'll get it now. To think up a thing like this!

This is some trip. All I need is my pal Valli Teemeister to say a parting word over me.

"Why aren't your dear eyes smiling at me? Why don't I hear your tender voice?"

These are the questions Teemeister asks every dead man or woman he packs off to the next world. I have no idea who thought up these words for him. He asks them in such sorrowful tones that even the dead folk might well break out in sobs, to say nothing of living ones. I once told Teemeister not to come to my funeral because I don't want to meet our Maker with a swollen nose and red eyes. If they want somebody to say a parting word over my dead body, let it be Sulev from the Nõmmik farmstead or some other jokester.

I shall certainly tell Teemeister about this trip home. Won't he laugh his head off? But I'll never breathe a word to Lepp.

Lepp has had a spell in the nut-house on account of a living stiff. Perhaps it's not proper to think of an incident like this while lying in a coffin, but this is how it came about. A couple of years ago a woman rang Lepp up and asked him to take some photographs of her mother who had just died. Well, Lepp took his camera and went to take pictures of the dear deceased. Who could have guessed that the mother was not dead at all, just faking? For a purpose. People do funny

things for a purpose.

So the dear mother was lying in that coffin for a purpose, there were flowers all round, candles burning, her cheeks powdered.

"A very beautiful dead lady," Lepp said to the daughter. "She looks just as if she were alive."

And the living dead lady lies in her coffin and never bats an eyelid. For a purpose. After days of admiring herself in the mirror, ah-ing and oh-ing, she confessed her cherished dream to her daughter:

"I'd like to have my picture taken in a coffin before I get all wrinkled up. It would be a nice photo to send to our relatives in Sweden."

The things people dream up.

Well, the daughter agreed, naturally. She bought a coffin, fitted it up, helped her mother into her best frock, and laid her out to be photographed.

Lepp took several pictures, offered his condolences and was already in the hall getting ready to go, when the daughter asked him how much she owed him.

"If you want the pictures nice and glossy, to be sent abroad, they'll come at three rubles apiece."

"Isn't it a bit too much?" the daughter asked.

"I've never made such photographs for less."

"You're asking too much," the daughter said angrily. "Two rubles would be quite enough."

"Three," Lepp stood his ground.

"Two-fifty."

"Three," Lepp insisted. "If you think three rubles is too much, find another phographer who would do it for less."

"Two seventy-five," the daughter haggled on.

"Thank you very much," Lepp said, "but I'm not going to make any pictures for you. Please accept my condolences." And he made for the door.

Suddenly the dead lady shouted from her coffin:

"Stop that haggling, you silly fool. Pay him whatever he asks."

Lepp dropped his camera, all went dark before his eyes and his mind became fuddled. The camera, thank God, did not break, his eyes cleared soon, but his mind took some setting right. He only came home from the loonybin six months later.

See what comes of making glossy pictures to be sent abroad. No, I'll never so much as squeak to Lepp about my trip in the coffin.

I wish I could turn over. I feel a pain in my thighs and shoulder-blades and a kind of heavy feeling in the back of my head. But how in hell's name would you turn, you stupid bastard? You're not a silkworm in a cocoon to turn any which way. A fisherman's body, blown by the forty winds, rubbed by endless nets, will not wiggle like a ballerina's little ass. There's a rheumatism in my bones, you can't get away from it.

Raksi had rheumatism in his bones too.

Every dog is a little bit like his master. On rainy mornings Raksi's bones crackled very much like mine. He was better'n a barometer. If he started rolling in the snow in winter, it meant a thaw was on the way. And he gave me storm warnings as well. If his coat started to smell, the wind was going to rise, no matter what the weatherman on the TV said about complete calm.

That day Raksi took a gun and went into the forest, his coat smelled.

Couldn't we have waited till the weather improved? But he took the gun and went into the forest, and as soon as his grey tail disappeared in the undergrowth, a nasty southwester started, the trees began to rustle and murmur, low clouds crept over and the sky spewed snow out of every hole. It snowed all day and all night. The snow filled the gun-barrel and Raksi's old eyes. So he couldn't see his way back.

Sure I could forbid him to go. I could and yet I couldn't. He was grey all over, and I thought that perhaps it was his last wish, to take a stroll in the wood, to visit all the familiar spots on Abruka, to bark at his old acquaintances the deer, to raise his hind leg near familiar bushes. Every old creature hides deep within him a bit of the youthful spirit. As a pup, Raksi had nosed his way through every juniper bush on Abruka, dug under every hummock. I allowed him complete freedom. Actually it's a story in itself, the way Raksi won his freedom.

"A dog's job is to guard the house and not to chase cats," I was told.

Marge told me that.

Well, what could I do? I went to Kingissepp to buy a chain. The dog stayed home, lying under the table, his eyes wet. He was a smart one, that dog. I spent three days in Kingissepp in Lepp's dark-room, with a bottle on the table, my own eyes wet too. I just couldn't make myself go and buy that chain. It's different with a boat—it needs a chain so that the storm doesn't smash it to bits; a launch, too, must be chained to an anchor so as not to be left without a master; a tree, now, needs to have its roots deep in the earth so as to

get all the necessary juices; but a dog must be free because it is born free and freedom as such gives it great joy.

I dragged my feet home, disliking the idea as much as a louse dislikes a hot bath. I had not shaved for three days, and had eaten nothing, so I did not even have the strength to heave a sigh when Marge started the usual cursing. I just sat, my head hanging low and not a word out of me, while Raksi gave joyful squeals from under the table and licked my hand like a child licks a lollipop. He was a smart one. He never forgot that I came home without a chain. He was more devoted to me than my own children.

"You never go to see your daughters for months on end," Marge once said, "but if your dog's dinner is late you raise Cain in the house."

Raksi followed me about everywhere.

On Abruka.

Once he even followed me farther abroad.

It was that day they nabbed me.

It so happened I had got stuck in a dog-rose bush and just couldn't get out. It held onto me fast. So I had to get out of my trousers. Going about in your underwear is not, strictly speaking, a punishable offence, as they say in courts, and because I had an urgent need of a bottle I couldn't bother about my attire. I just went straight ahead like a bulldozer, and happened upon a lady from Tallinn who did not enjoy the sight of some of the more interesting parts of my body too much.

So I ended up in the clink.

This sensitive lady insisted that nothing short of a

ten-day stretch could wash away the smirch on her honour, so I had to say goodbye to Marge, take the dog in tow and set out for my appointed place of detention in Kingissepp.

To begin with, they informed me that this was not a zoo and not a veterinary polyclinic.

"Glad to hear," I said. "My dog hates both."

I plonked down on a chair, Raksi leant against my legs and we waited for what was coming.

"Take your dog out," they told me, "we must write out the custody papers."

"I have no secrets from Raksi," I said, dignified-like. "Write them out in his presence.

There was a lot of indignant sniffing, but they let it go at that.

"How do you explain your obnoxious behaviour?" they asked me.

"I'd like to show you my backside."

"Mind your tongue! "

"What?"

"Don't forget where you are. If we put your words down in the record, you will be liable to a serious charge."

"That's what I want to do—to show you it's a serious matter."

"Cut out your clowning, Citizen Soom! "

"What clowning? D'you think I left my pants in the dog-rose bush just to be funny?"

"What d'you mean?"

"Just this! Take a look at my backside! It's all holes, like a grater."

And I started unbuckling my belt.

The upkeepers of law and order didn't let me take my pants down. They said they were busy people and could forego the sight of an Abrukan's bare behind.

"Well then, get on with your business. I wish you well," said I, buckling my belt again. "May I go home now?"

"In ten days' time," they said amicably.

"Is that so? You are generous folk here."

"Can't give you any less. If you hadn't been drunk, that would've been a different matter."

"A bad business. Are you going to lock me up right now?"

"Of course."

"Can't be done."

"Why not?"

"I must go to a shop. Buy some sausage for the dog."

"Your dog is no concern of ours."

"Perhaps so. But he is mine. I can't allow him to live on prison slops."

"Nobody's going to give him any slops. You'll have to send him home."

"That's absolutely out of the question! "

"You'll have to send him home, and that's final."

"As I'm sitting here with an ass full of holes, so I'm telling you—either we both go in or we both go home."

This made them stop and think.

"Quite a poser, wasn't it?

"You cannot punish the dog for my misdemeanours," I explained to them.

"So send it back to Abruka."

"The greatest punishment for a dog is to be parted

with his master. You don't seem to be well informed about canine psychology."

"Much do we care! "

"If your job is to straighten warped psychologies, do it properly."

"Spare us your sermons."

"As you like."

"Send the dog home," they said sternly.

"Comrades! " I wailed. "The dog will howl until he busts his guts if you lock me up alone."

"Are you sure?"

"Please, call in your superintendent. I don't see any point in discussing the problems with the two of you."

They thought a while, then said:

"Go out and have a smoke while we discuss this matter."

I went through three cigarettes, while Raksi made a thorough investigation of the police-station yard.

Then they asked us in again.

The lieutenant cleared his throat and said importantly:

"Citizen Kaspar Soom. Since your offence does not present a public menace, and in view of your specific place of residence (an overseas matter, sure enough) it has been decided to commute your ten days of detention to a fine of ten rubles."

"Thank you. You won't commute the fine too, will you! "

"Now, enough lip! "

Well, at least they let me go. Raksi and I made a bee-line for a pub. I ordered a mug of beer and two chops for Raksi.

"Have a feast, pal," I said to him. "And keep your chin up. We got off lightly, you and I! "

Things that happen to a person during his lifetime! And when else if not during his lifetime? When we close our eyes for ever nothing more will happen to us.

What can happen in a box like this, I ask you?

I would much rather sprawl in the hayloft. I'm aching all over. Lying stock-still and not allowed to move so much as a toe, like a Seventh-Day's Adventist on a Saturday!

One of our Adventists watched his mother-in-law drown before his very eyes in Kuressaare, near the yacht-club. When they asked him why he hadn't pulled his dear mother-in-law out of water, he answered, all sweet innocence, "God forbids me to do any work on Saturdays."

It's grown mighty calm out there. Nothing to marvel at, in fact.

It's a good thing I'm not really soused. Or I'd be singing at the top of my voice now:

Come to us from heaven high,
Bring us down a piece of pie!

I suppose Marge would've got off her high horse had I really started singing inside this coffin. She would, and no mistake. On the other hand, I can't say she's all that mean and prickly. Just a person, like any other. If she wasn't a decent person, and a woman too, would I have lived with her for thirty-three years? Loving her too! There's no point in living with a woman you don't love. Might as well take a wooden log to bed

with you if you feel lonesome all by yourself. Sure she's prickly. But she never nags and never complains. Actually Marge has a kind heart. But she doesn't like letting people know about it.

Before I went on my first visit to Luigi in Tallinn—she had another husband then, not the one who's been digging up graves in France—I rummaged in all the garrets and sheds on Abruka and collected a heap of cowbells. I thought I would take the bells to the newly-weds to hang up in their bedroom, reminding them of a herd coming home in the evening. Sweet memories, I reckoned. Marge, sure enough, pooh-poohed the idea, saying I'd better give them money for a colour TV set instead of lugging a lot of junk all the way to the capital. There was no room to turn about in their apartment as it was, no need to clutter it up any more. Well, she was right enough about their apartment being small. You could perhaps clean a sprat in their kitchen, but not a perch—the tail would stick out into the living-room. Still, I found a place for my music in their bedroom, right underneath the ceiling. I pushed the bells with my finger, and they all started singing softly—ting-a-ling, ting-a-ling—it was so sweet I wanted to lie on the floor and bawl. I remembered my youth, and the cows on Abruka that used to wear those bells. Memories can be terribly moving. The bedroom of the young couple became filled with my memories, big and small, the pre-war and the post-war kind. Their music scraped at my heart, making me want to howl in unison. Perhaps I did, too.

Because Luigi came in and started scolding:

"Do stop this racket, Dad! We are listening to a

music programme on TV."

It was like a blow on the head.

That's Marge's way too. When she's out of sorts, she lets you have it, fair knocks your teeth out.

Luigi has taken after her. Viire, now, is never so unfeeling. She's *my* daughter.

Well, I took my memories down from the nail, put them in my bag and brought them back home.

Why have I been telling you about those bells, I wonder? Oh yes, because when I took my bells out of the bag at home, Marge said spitefully:

"What did I tell you, yokel? This junk is not for a decent apartment."

"Marge," I said sadly. "That's not the point."

"What is?"

I heaved a sigh.

"If my children won't listen to the bells, I'll play them for my dog. One does not force a symphony like that on people."

I made the bells ring softly—ting-a-ling, ting-a-ling. Raksi began to whimper and wag his tail, as though he, too, was recalling all those Daisies and Marigolds and Blossoms, who arose before my mind's eye. Suddenly Marge began to sniff and tears poured down her cheeks.

"What's the matter with you?"

She sobbed, unable to say a word.

"Come on, Marge, what're you on about?"

"Kaspar... Isn't it a pity... All those cows are ... de-a-ad! "

When she said that, I felt a lump rise in my throat. Yes, a wife like this is worth loving.

Hmm... Love.

If only Marge knew that it was on account of love that I haven't completed my mission in town, she'd be so ashamed she'd wish the launch's bottom fell through beneath her. On the other hand, I have no right to blame her. If anybody is to blame, it's the one who created the world and populated it with men and women.

The genes are to blame.

Our nature is to blame.

Marge's nature is such that once she gets something into her head, she won't rest until she has had her way. Never mind if it's a worthwhile thing or just a piece of foolishness. Like now, for instance.

Her father, old Paet, was the same. Once he went to Kingissepp because of a ball lightning.

One day he was sitting at his table eating smoked plaice with bread, and suddenly a ball lightning flew into the window.

It circled about the room, touching nothing, saying nothing, then slipped into the open stove-door and flew out through the chimney. Those ball lightnings are quick workers.

Well, the old man used to keep his yoghurt in the stove in summer, and the lightning disposed of it. The milk-can became roasted brown like a side of mutton, as for the yoghurt—you could whistle for it. The old man raised a terrific rumpus. Really, we reasoned with him, you can count yourself lucky you weren't roasted yourself, not even your whiskers singed, but the old fool insisted the state insurance ought to recompense him for his loss as the result of a natural calamity.

Three litres of yoghurt with a high fat content, he said, that's no trifle. All our villagers were in stitches, but he grabbed his milk-can and went off to the insurance office in Kingissepp. There he banged his sooty can on the desk and demanded:

"Is this a milk-can?"

"Possibly," they replied.

"Then I'll ask you another question—is there any yoghurt in this can?"

They shrugged their shoulders. There was no yoghurt. They grinned.

"Why should there be yoghurt in it?" they asked.

"Because it *was* there! A ball lightning gobbled it up. Pay me my insurance now! "

"We don't pay off just like that. You must bring witnesses."

"What is there to witness? Don't you see the can is empty?"

"How do we know who gobbled up your yoghurt?"

"So you don't take an Abrukan's word?"

"So we don't. Bring witnesses."

The old man walked out in a huff. He didn't go away though, but stayed in the hall. He was not going to leave empty-handed. He could see, his was a fool's errand, but he wouldn't budge all the same. He'd got the bit between his teeth—because the year before the gale had torn the roof of Manni Simmukse's barn, and the state insurance paid up. They had paid Manni, but they would not pay him, old Paet! There was no justice in the world! Up to the farthest reaches of the Universe. So the old man hung about the hall of the insurance office till night-time. He just stood there,

wheezing and glowering at his feet like a ram with a cold. It was time to close up, but they could see that this victim of a ball lightning wasn't going to reconcile himself to the injustice. Well, one of the office workers had a brother who was a can-washer at the dairy-mill. He scribbled something on a piece of paper, gave it to the old man and said: "We have decided to grant your request. Take this letter to the dairy."

The next day old Paet returned to Abruka with a full can. Mighty pleased with himself! He pushed the can under the nose of anyone he met on the way—as proud as if it was full of diamonds. Actually, what he had in the can was not yoghurt, and not even milk but just cloudy bluish water, the kind you couldn't expect to ferment in a thousand years. The next year Marge ripped open the old man's jacket to make me a waistcoat to wear out at sea and found that note behind the lining. It said:

"*Vassa, pour the old fool a canful of swill to purge him good. Manivald.*"

Yes. Stubbornness like that doesn't lodge in a person's mind, it's in his blood. In his genes, as they now say. This stubbornness passed from old Paet's blood into the blood of his daughter Marge and from her into the blood of our daughters, and they will pass it down to their own sons and daughters, and so it will go on traipsing across the world like a wandering Gipsy.

When I started wooing Marge, thirty-three years ago, I soon got wise to her character. I tumbled to it at once that if she made up her mind to marry me, I didn't stand a chance. She would marry me, dead or

alive. If I didn't marry her of my own free will, she'd give me a drink of water in which she had soaked her nightgown. It works like a charm—you soak a nightgown in water overnight and then give a drink of that water to your young man. So I married her straightaway. It was a time when people were in a hurry to live. They had suffered plenty in the war and they all wanted happiness.

Marge was a pretty girl. And a virgin. Yes, we certainly were in love, I can't deny it. We *were* happy.

We were.

Yes...

Can't deny it...

It's getting stuffy in here, no air to breathe.

Lying here like a fish under ice, waiting for the spring when the ice will melt.

The worst thing that can happen to a person is for circumstances to get the better of him.

He must get the better of *them*.

Especially if he's a man.

When circumstances got the better of me in that dog-rose bush, I felt lousy.

Aha, somebody is shooting her mouth off again.

"Surely you know Kaspar's pals in town. Why didn't you go and ask, decent-like?"

"Don't expect me to trawl through every dive in the town. How can I guess in which gutter he's lying?"

"Kaspar is not the kind to lie in a gutter."

"There are enough whores in town."

Listen to that! Her genes are up in arms. Poor Marge. Old Paet's stubbornness and spitefulness are frothing out of her mouth.

I haven't touched another women all these thirty-three years.

And I might have.

There are enough whores in town.

She said it.

I went to Kingissepp on account of Raksi, and for no other purpose. For two nights and three days we sat together, the four of us, discussing how to immortalize his memory. There were the photographer Lepp, the vet Kõll, the undertaker Teemeister and I. Teemeister I met outside the bakery as soon as I got down from the Roomassaare bus.

"August is the bloodiest month," said Teemeister, wiping a working man's sweat from his brow. "It's as stuffy as in a pig's stomach, the tourists have guzzled up all the beer in town, and nobody wants to die."

His mug was on the sour side.

"What, no funeral today?" I asked.

"Not for five days running."

I invited him to share my can of home-made beer, and we also got a bottle of some stronger stuff in the shop. Then we went to Lepp's. Lepp has no wife, and never had one, so in his place you don't have to stand on ceremony and dish out all kinds of excuses.

Kõll only turned up towards evening. After the cat's funeral. The cat's mistress, an old maid, had ordered golden dentures for that cat from Kõll a few years ago.

"There you are," Teemeister sighed glumly, "cats are joining the great majority, but people just won't."

By then he had had quite a few. Some time later he rose to his feet, fixed a piteous glance on Kõll, and started off in a lugubrious tone of voice:

"Why aren't your dear eyes smiling at me? Why don't I hear your tender voice?"

"Shut up with your rigmarole," said Kõll. "We're still alive and kicking, and we haven't croaked yet."

"What a pity," Teemeister said sitting down, and gave a sob. "People just won't die."

It was quite a job to comfort him.

"Why don't you forget about people?" Lepp coaxed him. "You have to compose an epitaph for Raksi's gravestone."

"Raksi in memoriam," Teemeister repeated, scratching his bald pate with the tail of a fried plaice. "Think I can do it?"

"You are the only one who can," I said sincerely.

You see, Teemeister is really a gifted person. He has worked at about a dozen trades, and made good in every one of them.

And now he was scratching his bald pate with the tail of a plaice and trying to think up a fitting requiem.

"Since I have never set eyes on your dog," he said, "I can speak of him only as of a dog in the philosophical sense and not a particular dog."

"No, that won't do," I said. "Raksi was a particular dog."

"Too bad," said Teemeister with a heavy sigh. "What are we going to do then?"

"I shall help you," said Lepp. "I've still got those negatives."

He went to his darkroom. Before we downed

another couple of glasses, back he came with Raksi's life-size photograph. I haven't got as good a picture of Raksi as the one he tacked to the wall.

For a long time we looked at Raksi in silence.

Then Teemeister rose and began his refrain:

"Why aren't your dear eyes smiling at me today? Why don't I hear your tender voice?"

A lump rose in my throat.

And tears came to my eyes.

And Teemeister continued in the soft voice befitting a funeral oration:

"Dear Raksi! When I was little, all dogs seemed big and fierce to me. When I was a young man, I imagined that some dogs both barked and bit, but others only barked. Now that I have lived a long life, in the course of which I have seen hundreds of dogs, I know that there are only two categories of dogs in the world—dogs who have good masters and dogs who have bad masters. You, Raksi had a fine master. May you rest in peace."

"Thank you, Volli," I said tearfully. "Let's now drink to Raksi's memory."

We drank to Raksi's memory.

Then we sat in silence for a while.

"You made a fine speech," said Lepp, "but not quite to the point."

"Why not?"

"There is also that dog from the island of Hiiumaa. Who does not bark or bite, but remembers everything."

"Possibly," said Teemeister. "But you must bear in mind that this was my first funeral oration said for a dog."

"We'll bear that in mind," said Lepp.

"Let me say a few words too," said Kõll.

He rose and cleared his throat.

"Friends," he began, "I think that a person who has not had a loved animal in his life cannot be regarded as a full man. When I went to Abruka to operate on Raksi's leg, I saw that Kaspar kept Raksi not for guarding the house and not because there is a fashion for dogs. Kaspar's heart had a need for such a dog. Am I right, Kaspar?"

"Sure."

"And another thing I want to tell you, Raksi, is that you had a warm and noble heart. You had an amazingly broad forehead. It's a sign of a rich inner life. Thank you for having been what you were. Let's drink to Raksi's memory! "

"Thank you, friend."

Lepp was the next to rise.

"I cannot make fine speeches, like educated people do. I am a simple photographer. But I feel the same way you do. I promise in the presence of you all that in memory of Kaspar's dog I shall mount a photo-exhibition in Abruka's club dedicated to Kaspar and Raksi."

"Right! " shouted Teemeister, banging his fist on the table. "Both of them. Fine chaps! Unique personalities! "

"Thank you, Anton," I said to Lepp.

"Let us drink to the memory of one and the health of the other," announced Teemeister.

We drank.

I had a strange feeling, a kind of emptiness and sad-

ness and something like exaltation as well. I could not make out of what there was more: sadness because Raksi was no more or gladness that I had such wonderful friends and we were drinking to Raksi's memory in such complete accord.

In the meantime it had grown dark, and the moon had risen in the mysterious August sky. The stars were sparkling, glittering and falling.

"It's a sin to sleep on a night like this," we decided unanimously. Lepp dragged all his mattresses and blankets out into the garden and we lay down on them under two apple-trees and some gooseberry bushes, each with his own conversation and his own meditations.

"Men," Kõll said, "want to hear how the stars tinkle when they fall?"

We did.

Kõll went inside and brought us a glass of vodka and a fork each. We lay beneath the gooseberry bushes and sipped the drinks slowly, each time tapping the glass with the fork, and the tinkling of the glasses and the falling of the stars which seemed to be hurtling past the earth into some bottomless pit, both warmed our hearts and chilled our stomachs.

Man feels frail when faced with the beauty of the Universe.

On an August night I rarely fall asleep out at sea in my boat, with the waves whispering against the sides and the star-studded sky spread overhead. The vault of heaven and the song of the waves are unforgettable, they are imprinted on my mind like the names of my own daughters. But this was something new to me:

you just tap a glass with a fork, and you get pure music which transforms everything around you.

It is interesting the way the world is arranged. A brain-twister, the whole thing.

Was all this really created for Man? How had we deserved this?

Sometimes, when you go out to relieve yourself in the morning, the beauty of the world moves you to tears. How would you like it if the grass was not green, but, say, glaring red, and the starlings did not trill their velvety warbles but roared like a bulldozer? Wouldn't it be terrible?

Humanity would've all gone stark raving mad or run away to look for a better planet. I'm sure of it.

I imagine I'd have gone off my rocker in the war, had not I had with me our Abruka woods and the sea. You can't stuff the sea or the woods into your pocket, but they were always with me. That Christmas Eve, when I was lying face down in the snow near Velikiye Luki, with half the chaps in my platoon already stiff, I covered my ears with my hands so as not to puke from horror, shut my eyes and summoned the sea to my help.

And it came. It talked to me. It said: "Hold on, Kaspar Soom from Abruka. Wars come and go, but you and I are eternal. You and I are greater than the greatest war."

And I held on. Even now it makes me sick to think how many fine lads remained lying in that snow forever. Some of them from Abruka, too. I can't understand it—they had the sea to help them, the same as I, why then did they remain lying there? Was their sea

smaller than mine?

On the other hand... How can you fathom that sea? Because, you see, the sea is not just so much water. Not by a long chalk.

In the meantime the stars in the sky had begun to dim and we stopped tapping our glasses with forks.

It was getting light.

Somewhere a street-sweeper's broom could be heard swishing over the asphalt.

Dogs had awakened.

I wanted to discuss Raksi some more. That monument I wanted to put up to him. But we had already drunk to his memory, and it didn't seem right to bring up the subject again.

Teemeister was sighing and moaning softly.

"Let's talk about something, men. You told us a first-rate story last time, Kaspar, about boots. Do you know another like it?"

"If you insist..."

"It'll tide us over till the shops open and we can buy some beer."

That story about boots ran as follows:

A poor man had a beautiful wife. He was very fond of her, but he was so poor that he didn't even have a spare pair of boots, just the one he always wore. One morning he went into the woods thinking of only one thing–how to please his beautiful wife he was so fond of.

So he decided to pick some wild strawberries. It was just the right season, the strawberries were ripe and red and juicy and he thought his wife would be happy to have such a present.

The dew had not yet dried in the forest, and the man didn't want his only pair of boots to get wet. So he took them off, pushed them under a bush and went berry-picking barefoot.

He picked some strawberries in one glade, then in another and so he went deeper and deeper into the forest. And he got lost. It took him three days to find his way back. He had the front of his shirt full of strawberries, but his boots were not where he had left them. He looked for them until evening, but he never found them. When darkness fell he trudged home despondently. He entered his yard and suddenly heard the voice of a stranger saying to his wife, "I love you terribly, sweetheart."

The husband gave such a loud and piteous sigh that his wife heard him and ran out into the yard.

"I'm back," the husband said sadly. "I've brought you some strawberries."

His wife then said reproachfully, "You took a long time picking your strawberries. I've forgotten you already."

"Have you really?"

"Of course I have. I waited for you the first day. On the second I went into the forest to look for you, and I found your boots. I decided that the wolves had torn you to pieces. I wept the whole day, and in the evening I held a wake for you. And on the third day I married another man. That's all."

"And what shall I do now?" the husband said in dismay.

"If you love me..." his wife said.

"I love you," the husband said with a sigh.

"Then go back into the forest. Everybody thinks you're dead. We mourned you, I was a widow and I married another. Just imagine all the bother I'll have running about offices to make out new papers—that you've come back to life, that I never was a widow and my second marriage was illegal."

"You're right," the husband agreed, "there'll be plenty of bother. I suppose I'd better go back into the forest."

"You're a reasonable man."

"And what shall I do with the strawberries?"

"Leave them. I love strawberries."

"Perhaps you'll let me have my boots. The dew is chilly in the forest."

"I've given them to my new husband. They fit him wonderfully, isn't it strange?"

"It *is* strange," the husband agreed. "Well, goodbye."

And off he went into the forest, and nobody ever saw him again.

When I finished that story, Kõll said:

"What a horrible story. Makes my flesh creep. Lord, only women can be so heartless."

"Men aren't any better," Lepp retorted. "I'd never have given that bitch so much as a strawberry stalk."

"Don't speak like that," Kõll reasoned. "You've never been married. You don't know what love does to you."

Kõll mopped the cold sweat on his brow.

"The bloody hussy! She even pulled his boots onto that new stud of hers! "

Teemeister said in even tones:

"It's all true. He who loves has to suffer."

He still loved his wife, even though she had kicked him out of her house.

"Where d'you pick up such stories?" Volli asked me.

"I don't know. They just come into my head."

"Don't boast! "

"I'm not boasting. What have I got my head screwed on for? To knock nails into the wall?"

"All Abrukans are daft."

"Sure. It's living overseas does it."

Volli waved a hand. What have you?

Is it important how stories are made up? The important thing is what they say. If Teemeister had spent all those years out at sea, as I have, trying to decipher what's written on the waves for days on end and watching seagulls wing about, he'd also have thought up some sensational story, sure thing.

And then I told my pals the story about Nightingale Maali.

I wouldn't swear that Nightingale Maali was her exact name, but when I think of her, this name comes into my head, so it might very well really have been her name.

Anyone who comes to Abruka and who has eyes in his head can see Nightingale Maali for himself.

This is her story.

A long time ago there lived on Abruka a man called Nightingale Villem with his wife Maali. The husband earned their living at sea, and the wife worked in the field. Probably, Villem came of a clan of men with ringing voices whose conversation was like a nightingale's song.

Villem was tall, fair-headed and smart, and he had the gift of the gab. Maali was quiet, had dark hair and her cheeks were as ruddy as ashberries.

In the evening Maali hobbled the tired horse and let it out to graze, and herself climbed the Vesipõld Hill. There she stood, shading her eyes with both hands from the setting sun as she watched Villem's oars hurrying to reach the shore.

There she stood and waited until the boat ran its bow into the sand. Then she waved and ran to meet Villem, her bare legs gilded by the slanting sun-rays, her eyes sparkling and her cheeks flushed like ashberries.

It happened every evening.

But one day, when she climbed the Vesipõld Hill, Maali saw that Villem had already stepped ashore and was embracing some woman. When he caught sight of Maali, his arms dropped to his sides, while Maali became frozen with amazement. The hands she had lifted to her forehead also became frozen, and no force on earth could move them.

The other woman dived into some alder-bushes, while Villem shouldered his nets and walked towards Maali at a leisurely pace.

"Why aren't you running down, Maali?" he shouted. "What's the idea standing there like a salt pillar?"

But Maali never moved. She had indeed turned into a pillar. Her voice did not come from her mouth, her breathing did not warm her heart. And her cheeks were no longer red like ashberries but grey like the stones in the fence.

"Maali, why take on so over such a trifle?" Villem whispered in fright.

But Maali gave no reply. Her hands were frozen over her eyes, her breast did not rise with breathing, and her bare legs did not look gilded in the rays of the setting sun, but seemed greenish, like moss-grown stone crosses in the cemetery.

"Maali, Maali," Nightingale Villem called soundlessly, but it was to no avail.

He then picked up his wife and carried her home, casting anxious glances all around. But she did not feel like his wife, whose strong body warmed him at night like a stove. She was as stone, mute and cold, as the wall in the cellar.

Sweating all over, Villem carried his wife across the threshold, dropped her on their bed and covered her with all the blankets, rugs and covers they had in the house. Then he built a fire in all the stoves and fireplaces where the chimneys drew well, took his accordion and sang to his wife all the best songs he knew.

But it was all to no avail.

In the night Villem brought the horse from the pasture, harnessed it into their cart, took his wife to the cemetery and buried her.

In the morning, when he woke up and went out into the yard, he saw his Maali, mute and cold, standing on the Vesipõld Hill, lit up by the crimson dawn, her hands shielding her eyes, her face turned to the sea. Things look bad, Villem thought and decided to lug his wife home again and throw her in the well. But the water began to rise in the well till it flowed over, flooded the yard, poured into the house, covered the floor and began to rise towards the ceiling. Villem ran about trying to save some of his property, carrying

things up into the garret, but the water reached there, too.

"What are you doing to me, Maali! " he cried, gasping. "Come to your senses! "

But the water kept rising, so Villem had no choice but to lower a ladder into the well and bring his wife up. What was he to do with her? He pushed her into a stack of reeds he had prepared to repair the roof; he pushed her deep in, so that nobody should see his shame. But a storm broke out in the evening, thunder crashed with terrible force over Abruka and the lightning struck the stack.

Villem stood on the middle of the yard, listening to the reeds crackling in the fire and suddenly he heard his wife's soft voice coming from the flames:

"It hurts, Villem, it hurts."

He dashed into the flames and got burnt to death.

And the next morning Maali was again standing on the Vesipõld Hill, her hands shielding her eyes, her stony gaze fixed on the sea, and nobody dared to touch her any more.

Maali still stands on that hill. When you come in from the sea, Maali is a kind of beacon. And whoever disregards this beacon is sure to hit underwater rocks and smash his screw to smithereens. Many a generation of Abruka's fishermen owe their lives to Maali.

That's the story of Nightingale Maali.

When I finished telling it, nobody said a word.

The sun had risen, and dewdrops were glistening on the leaves of the gooseberry-bushes.

A swallow twittered.

"Some story," muttered Teemeister. He went

indoors, took a shopping bag and said:

"Come on, Kaspar, let's go buy some beer."

In the street we saw a girl of singular beauty. I covered my chin with my hand so that she shouldn't see my two-day stubble. The girl's slender young legs were tanned to a sheen, she had dark hair and her cheeks were like ashberries.

"Tell her how pretty she is," Teemeister whispered to me.

"What else?"

"Come on, tell her! "

I did not tell her anything. I was happy enough to pass by with my unshaven mug covered with my hand.

"Why didn't you tell her, Kaspar?"

"It's not for the likes of us to tell young girls such things."

"You may be right. But we would've forgotten those words before evening, and the girl would've remembered them all her life. It's a pity."

And Teemeister heaved a sigh. He's a good-hearted bloke.

Again somebody is discussing Marge's little joke.

"Our husbands are not angels either, but nobody on Abruka has ever cut such a caper, Marge."

"Nobody has, and I shall."

"My August drinks worse than your Kaspar, but I'm not going to bury him alive."

"That's up to you."

"After all he's your husband and the father of your children."

"You repeat yourself, Malli. I know that he is a husband and a father. Enough! I'm sick of it."

"You were always a bit queer in the head, ever since you were a wee lass..."

"And what do you suggest I do about it? Put him on a silk cushion like a Pekinese?"

"Yes, you're still queer in the head."

"You're saying it out of envy, that's what. Because Kaspar had no use for you."

"Goodness! The things a woman has to listen to in her old age! "

"I know what I'm talking about, Malli. You had a fling with him too. And don't make such a sour face. You were left high and dry, Malli."

"Want to hear a bit of home truth? Everyone here will bear me out."

"Out with it."

"If Juta hadn't gone off to Sweden, you'd never have got Kaspar, not if you sickened for him till kingdom come. There! "

"Malli! "

"You'd never have had him. Never! Never! "

A fine kettle of fish I call it. You lie in the coffin, and people pull you apart bone by bone in your hearing.

Juta.

Yes...

My, how cramped it is between these pine boards—a body cannot even heave a proper sigh.

Juta.

Isn't it funny that a man should be afraid of a name that makes him feel the touch of a soft palm on his face? You hear the name spoken in the street, or over the radio, or a brother calling his sister, or a mother calling her daughter, and shivers run down your spine and the blood rushes to your face.

And yet the name is made up of the ordinary letters of the Estonian alphabet. But it's the only one that makes a man's heart shrink from sweet pain and flutter like a sprat's tail in the net.

Juta.

How many thousands of times—nay, Kaspar, don't shy away from the truth! —how many millions of times did that name flash through my mind and there isn't a nook inside my head where it didn't nestle day and night, morning and evening. When I rose into attack, and after a battle. It was there at the very moment when a bullet grazed my ear.

Juta.

I didn't repeat the name of my own mother so many times. Mother is Mother, she does not need another name.

When our first daughter was born I very much wanted to call her Juta, but I kept a check on myself and didn't. We named her Luigi, from the word "luik", which means "swan". The big white bird of memory. Yes...

When I was leaving Juta's garret that last time at dawn, she said, braiding her hair:

"When you come back, we'll celebrate a jubilee."

"What kind of jubilee?"

"Kaspar," she whispered, blushing, "we've been to-

gether ninety-nine times."

"Imagine ... silly girl ... keeping track of every time..."

"If you love, you remember."

That's how it was.

And that's how she remained in my memory—braiding her hair in the door of the garret on the Liiviku farmstead, her linen nightgown rosy in the light of the dawn.

"If you love, you remember," the words hammered in my head as I walked home, had my breakfast and packed my knapsack.

"When you come back, we'll celebrate a jubilee," the words pounded in my blood as I wandered aimlessly about the yard. I had meant to attend to a few things before I went off to the war. But I just couldn't think what those things were.

"Why don't you sit down?" Mother finally said with a sigh. "Lord knows when you will have a chance to sit at peace again."

And she began to weep—as all mothers did when we left for the war.

I called my father out into the yard and said to him:

"Turn the grindstone, Dad. I might as well whet the scythes before I go."

In complete silence we whetted three scythes. Dad just sighed when I picked up yet another scythe.

When I took the fourth, he said:

"We'll do this one when you come back, son. Thank you."

And he stopped turning the grindstone.

"Let's finish the job, Dad. I mightn't be back for the

next haymaking."

How could we know that I wouldn't be back for the one after and the one after that either?

When we got into the boat and made for Kuressaare, the thought of those freshly sharpened scythes gleaming on the shed wall, ready and waiting to cut the thick dew-laden grasses, made me feel pleased with myself.

Juta saw me off, walking to the very end of the pier, waving, but she never shed a tear, unlike some of those who had got betrothed at the eleventh hour, to say nothing of married women.

"Don't forget me!" she shouted. "Will you remember?"

No need to ask, surely.

Ninety-nine times. I never forgot that number, not for a minute. And I can still see it as though written in chalk on the blackboard in class.

I did not forget. But the jubilee never came to pass... Hell, what's in a jubilee? Nothing came to pass. Nothing.

Three years later we came back to Kuressaare, and I went to HQ at once to cadge a leave of absence for a visit to Abruka. They wouldn't give it to me, saying there was no hurry, we had to liberate the whole of Estonia first and then we'd have all the time in the world to kiss our girls till our lips got blue. Well, they chaffed me, and we all laughed, because at that time the liberation of Estonia seemed to be a matter of another couple of weeks. Only the Sõrve Peninsula was still held by the Germans.* Nobody had an inkling of

* The Sõrve Peninsula was only wrested from the Germans in the autumn of 1944, after prolonged fighting in which the Estonian Corps took part.—*Ed.*

what lay ahead of us—that there'd be that night of hand-to-hand fighting in Tehumardi and that débâcle of a landing party in Vintri. That's the way of the war—it gives you no let-up till the very end.

Still I went to HQ so many times and made such a nuisance of myself that finally they gave me a 24-hour leave of absence, to see my parents. But I only thought of the jubilee, not my parents.

I got into a boat at the Tori landing-stage at dusk and started rowing for Abruka. My fingers seemed to be weeping tears of joy at the feel of the oars again, after three years.

It was a warm autumn, the sea was calm, the stars glimmered in the sky just as in peacetime. I did not row very hard to begin with, I simply enjoyed the old familiar feeling, and a lump rose in my throat at the creaking of the rowlocks and the gurgling of the water. It was such a wonderful feeling no words can describe it.

I was going to Abruka! Home! To Juta!

Before the war what had I except Abruka, home and Juta? Nothing.

The closer I came to Abruka, the harder I rowed. I had long tossed off my greatcoat, and taken my boots off, and I was rowing like mad, like a crazy boy, pushing my bare feet into the boat's bottom. The long war seemed to have dissolved in the mist-laden wake. Home! To Abruka! To Juta!

When the boat hit the shore at Pöörna Promontory, I was quite spent and panting for breath—after all, I had rowed ten kilometres across the sea—and I greedily swallowed the air of my native island.

It smelled, as always at that season, of junipers and wild geese droppings. The pungent, unforgettable smell familiar since childhood. I walked towards my village across the dark stretch of wasteland, weaving my way among the junipers. I imagined that I was walking with quiet dignity, but I was probably running like mad, because otherwise I wouldn't have stumbled and smashed my nose against a root. I felt a salty taste seeping over my upper lip into my mouth.

"Now Juta and I are alike," I thought. When Juta was a little girl a cow butted her in the face and she had a whitish scar on her upper lip.

There was no doubt in my mind where to go first—to my parents' home or to the Liiviku farmstead. What liberator-soldier would make the rounds of the village first before hurrying to his sweetheart?

To Juta!

The nearer I came to her farmstead the louder my heart pounded. Worse than before the first battle. Actually, before that first battle we were so dead beat from the march and the frost that the heart did not have the strength to pound all that hard.

When I reached the gate, I whistled to Muki, their dog. He did not respond.

The light was on in the kitchen, but the heavy curtains on the window did not allow me a look inside.

I pushed the door. It was locked.

That was odd.

Nobody had ever locked doors on Abruka. Even chaste virgins and God-fearing old maids slept with their doors unlocked. To say nothing of the doors of barns and sheds. The war has surely changed the ways

of honest folks, I thought.

I knocked on the door loudly.

The dog began to bark. Nobody seemed to be stirring in the kitchen.

"Juta! It's me! "

The barking of the dog was my only answer.

"Muki! It's me! "

Nobody seemed to have any intention of opening the door.

"Juta! It's me, Kaspar! "

The dog was barking, there was complete silence inside the house, and a thousand nagging thoughts pestered me.

Wasn't she expecting me? Hadn't she been waiting for me? Had three years proved too long? Why promise then? Does love pass so quickly, vanishing like water in the sand?

Could such a thing have happened? Why then had I been straining my every nerve, forcing my way home through mud and blood? How could she do this to me?

I banged on the door with both fists.

"Open up! " I yelled. "It's me! It's us! Open the door to the Estonian Corps! "

The bolt was drawn in the passage, the door creaked and a wheezy voice muttered from the darkness:

"Don't bite the Corps, Muki! "

"Greetings! " I cried.

The voice in the dark passage said:

"Nobody to greet here. I'm Jaagup."

"I can see you're Jaagup. D'you remember me?"

"Of course I remember you. Didn't you screw our Juta night after night. I slept in the barn and heard

everything."

"Where is she?"

"Who?"

"Juta."

"She's far away. And maybe deep down."

"Stop talking rot, Jaagup! I'm a soldier and soldiers are rough fellows. Where are Mihkel and Liisa?"

"They're far away, and maybe deep down."

"Jaagup, I'm in no mood for jokes. Where are they?"

"In Sweden, or perhaps on the sea bottom."

"And Juta?"

"She went with them."

"When?"

"Mebbe an hour ago. Can't you feel the smell?" And Jaagup sniffed the air.

Indeed, I could feel Juta's smell. She had washed her hair with camomile before going.

I felt dizzy. I flopped on a stool and propped my elbows on the table. The smell of camomile was choking me, turning my insides out.

"Want some beer?"

Beer? What do I want with beer?.. Beer?.. What can you expect from stupid Jaagup?

I made myself get up because I had to go out, I was feeling sick, and would throw up any moment.

Out in the yard I held onto the frame of the well: my innards rose so that I shuddered all over. After I was sick, I felt a bit better, but as soon as another whiff of the camomile scent came from I don't know where, I gasped and my stomach was convulsed again.

That fool Jaagup was standing beside me with that

perpetual grin on his face.

"Are you that sorry that Juta went away?"

I muttered something and sighed and held onto my belly with both hands. Tears were pouring from my eyes like water from the net when you haul it in.

"No sleeping with wenches for a long time?"

"Oh, go to hell! "

I went out of the yard swaying, crossed the street, climbed over the stone fence and made my way to the sea. But the smell of camomile pursued me and the pain in my empty stomach did not abate—as though somebody was pulling red-hot barbed wire through my intestines.

I reached the juniper thickets, felt about for a big boulder in the darkness, and sank down on the ground, leaning against its hard cool side.

So I sat, my eyes wet, my back pressed to the cold stone, my nose raised to the tops of juniper-bushes.

My heart felt trampled and empty like the square after a market day.

Could a war end like that?

The stars were glimmering, the sea was breathing, somewhere a cow lowed in its shed. An ordinary late evening. And I was sick. When I struggled to my feet, the ground heaved beneath me, together with the moss hummocks and juniper-bushes.

I made my way to the seashore, washed my face and rinsed my mouth. It began to dawn on me at this point that whatever happened I had to cross the threshold of my home. And at once a thought stabbed me—what if my house was empty too? If the Liiviku people had gone, my family might have gone too!

I walked home, blood began to circulate through my veins again, but it no longer pounded in my heart and my temples as it had near Juta's farmstead. I walked towards my own home as though there had not been a three years' absence. When tramping the roads of war, I often thought that, even if I were wounded and crippled, I would make sure to come back to the land were I grew up and see again the sea of my childhood. And the thought made me shiver with homesickness. And here I was walking towards my home unhurriedly, taking my time, as though returning after an evening's fishing. Could a war end like that?

Yes, it was a rum evening, now I think of it. I'd never have thought that I was so soft. That I would go all to pieces and puke. It's a funny thing. Nothing like that had ever happened to me—before or after. I didn't puke at Velikiye Luki, where some of the lads had their guts scattered over the snow, nor in Tehumardi, when three Germans fell on me; I clenched my teeth till blood came, but I never once puked.

It's a funny thing. Juta's going proved to be more terrible than three years of fighting.

Luckily my folks were at home.

Hot tears dripped from Mum's chin when she saw me...

Early the next morning I rowed back to Kuressaare. We still had to knock the Fritzes out of Sõrve. The war was not over yet. But now it was a very different war as far as I was concerned...

Yes... Those who live in Sweden send us photographs from time to time. Juta sent one too. Sitting at a table, with flowers in a vase. Glasses on her nose—

of a shape we don't see here. A wig on her head. But the scar from that cow's horn is still there, on her upper lip. Even the capitalist system hasn't been able to rid her of it. She will have something of ours till the end of her days.

That's how it is.

Damn you, Malli, you had to remember Juta. If she says another word about it, I'll give a cough that will send her flying through the wall together with her bundles. When women start yacking, their mouths are bigger than the January moon.

At least Malli hasn't told them how I failed with her the first time. Marge and she have some sort of a long-standing feud. Malli's sons, if you please, are better than Marge's daughters, and d'you know why?—because they're sons and not daughters! As though Marge had any say in it! What rot. But Marge hasn't enough sense of humour to shrug it off. She takes it to heart and grows thinner and thinner. Sometimes I take a look at her, and see there's not much of the woman left in her—no ass to speak of, and as scrawny as a fir-branch that has been rubbed with emery-paper. How could one love such a scarecrow? I told her more than once, "Eat more and take joy in life! "

Not she!

Now, too, I suppose she's gone without food all these three days that I was away. Poor soul. I'd like to say a comforting word to her, but there's no air to breathe here and I can't so much as move my little finger. By God, I'll soon become as stiff as an Egyptian mummy. Now, let's try it.

"Hey, girls! "
"What made you jump, Luise?"
"There's somebody in this coffin! "
"Why?"
"Didn't you hear? There was a funny kind of noise. As though somebody farted."

Oh Lord.
Oh my, oh my.
Life's a rum thing.

I want to laugh. How I'd like to shout to Luise from inside this coffin: "Honoured to have your attention!"

Luise, sweetheart, if you've come out in spots from fear, please forgive me my sin. Where else will you find men who fart in a coffin? Only on Abruka!

Imagine!

It must be from the overload.

After all, we didn't sleep for several nights, and we strained our brains to the utmost. Made important decisions too. Things could've gone differently, of course. It is because of my important decision that I'm now lying in this coffin on my back, without moving a muscle, like a frozen frog.

When Volli and I came back to Lepp's place yesterday with a bagful of beer-bottles, the men had tidied up, put a clean table-cloth on and even shaved. Those are the kind of men to tackle global problems with.

When we'd all had the hair of the dog in the shape of a couple of mugs of beer, I glanced at the wall where Raksi's large photograph was pinned and said:

"Raksi, you've gone into the forest with a gun, and

I shall never see you again. The forest is a big one on Abruka, it's easy to lose one's way there, even without a gun. But because of you I've come together with my friends and I am very grateful to you for it, for there's nothing better in life than being with dear friends."

"After such a speech one cannot drink plain old beer," Teemeister said. "Let's open a bottle of vodka."

Well, we opened a bottle of vodka, and Lepp made scrambled eggs for us. My heart felt light with the memory of my dog and the joy of being with my friends.

When I decided the moment was right, I said:

"Now I await suggestions as regards the monument."

"Are you sure you want to put up a monument to him?" Teemeister asked pensively.

"Of course."

"Are you firm in your decision?"

"Sure."

"Well then, we must decide about the location and the material."

"There's no doubt about the location. On Abruka."

"That's pretty obvious," the men laughed. "Wouldn't it be silly if Kaspar put up a monument to his dog on Ruhnu or on Kihnu."*

"Wait a moment," Teemeister said. "Stop that noise. Let me think."

We let him.

"Kaspar," Teemeister said after a while, "wouldn't you like to put a monument to somebody else or something else?"

* Ruhnu and Kihnu are, like Abruka, small islands in the Baltic Sea.—*Ed.*

A funny question.

I pondered.

"I'm waiting," said Teemeister. "It's very important."

"Yes I would," I said, after thinking it over.

"Well! "

"I'd put up a monument to the rising sun."

"So," Teemeister nodded. "What else?"

"I'd also put up a monument to the westerly wind. When it rises, you have the waves and the smell and what-not."

"So," Teemeister nodded. "What else?"

"I'd also put up a monument to the sprat, never mind fresh or salted."

"Thank you," said Teemeister. "Let us drink to this then: may the sun rise every morning, may new winds be born in the west, east, north and south, and may the fish with the pretty name of sprat flourish and multiply in the blue sea."

"Thank you," said I.

"Your idea to put up a monument to Raksi is undoubtedly a touching one," Teemeister continued, wolfing the scrambled eggs. "But..." he lifted his fork with a piece of egg on it. "The best monument to the rising sun is a gorgeous sunrise, a strong and fresh wind replaces the old and weary one, and a little nimble spratlet is better that the biggest stone monument to fish. Do you get my idea, Kaspar?"

"It's clear enough. Expressed in pure Estonian." I sighed.

"But you're right, Volli," I added. "The reason my heart aches so is that Raksi's left no puppies."

"Is that so?"

"It can't be," said the vet Kõll. "Raksi was a super dog in all respects."

"There were puppies. But they drowned them. Before I found out."

Even though I am convinced that a man worth the name can only have one dog worth the name in his lifetime, I'd have raised Raksi's son or daughter. I even said to Miina from the Mürgi farmstead when I met her by the shop:

"I had great hopes and expectations, Miina. I hoped to become a grandfather. And you threw all my grandchildren into the sea."

"How d'you know they were your grandchildren?"

"Raksi told me. He is overwhelmed with grief."

"Accept my condolences."

"Great use they are to Raksi and me! "

"Don't be upset, Kaspar. Dogs are quick about making more dogs."

"No, that was the last time. Raksi has had his day."

"Aw, nonsense! "

But I was proved right.

Irmi from the Mõniste farmstead also had a litter of Raksi's pups, but they went to count the waves too. After that I wasn't in too much of a hurry to say hello to Veera, the mistress of the Mõniste farmstead. And when I finally had a chance, I said to her:

"Couldn't you leave one male pup to adorn nature?"

"Adorn nature?" Veera asked, goggling at me. "Your dog is lame in three legs and needs glasses for his eyes too. Call that an adornment to nature?"

"It doesn't matter what the father looks like."

"Doesn't it? Don't you know that a drunk begets drunks or idiots?"

"I know that."

But Raksi wasn't a drunk or an idiot.

A man will never think of such hurtful words as a woman. All right, you may let a taunt pass, forget it. But a dog never will. Raksi was beside me when we had that exchange. He heard everything. A man will never be so mean. Even when he has plenty of reason. When Kõll and I were having a snooze on the sofas after operating on Raksi's leg, Raksi, as soon as he woke up from the anaesthetic, lapped up all the water in the glass that stood by the mirror and chewed up Kõll's dentures which were in that glass. Kõll never said a word. And not because he had no dentures and couldn't articulate properly. He simply kept quiet. Because he understood the animal's need. I was so touched that I brought another bottle of brandy from the cellar.

"A dog's leg will cost us more than a daughter's wedding! "

What a comparison!

Indeed!

Meanwhile things had taken an odd turn at Lepp's.

"It's a tricky problem," mused Teemeister. "And the only thing I can think of is to have the opposite opinion."

"I don't understand, Volli."

"What is there to understand? We must call in some women."

"Volli..."

"I'm putting my proposal to the vote. Who is in favour of calling in some womenfolk?"

"Not a bad idea," said Lepp. "We seem to 've got into a rut."

Kõll said nothing. In general, he talks little and in a soft voice because he is an animal doctor and animals don't chatter.

As for myself, I decided that since I was in town I might just as well taste some of the pleasures of town life.

My soul yearned for something new. Just you try casting nets three months running. You get so addled that instead of a sprat you see the ghost of your late grandfather staring at you from the net.

"I agree," I said. "If the ladies don't spurn our company let them come."

"You're a sport, Kaspar," said Teemeister, smiling his sweet smile. "I like you more and more. Tonight the prettiest and the youngest wench will be yours."

"I don't want her too young," I said. "I'd prefer her at least to 've cut her teeth."

I began to get back my taste for life. Of course it's fine living on Abruka, but a patch of land is a patch of land, and the soul sometimes yearns for wider spaces.

I thought I'd use Lepp's electric shaver lest the ladies take me for a bum, but Kõll nudged me in the ribs.

"Let's go have a pee, Kaspar," he said.

How can one object to such a human offer? Besides, I heard a note of urgency in Kõll's voice.

"Kaspar," he said in a whisper, "now is the time

to beat it."

"It's not nice," I said. "A man shouldn't leave a woman in the lurch."

"What use do you have for those women?"

"Since God has created them, they must have a use."

"Is that so?"

"There are no superfluous things in nature."

"At any rate I'm leaving," said Kõll, buttoning up his fly. "I've been drinking and I'm not very sure of myself."

"I can help you. If you get too hot, I'll put a cool sobering hand on your shoulder."

"Better think it over," said Kõll sternly and cleared his throat.

"I've been faithful for thirty-three years. I can't keep it up any longer."

It was a joke, but he was in no mood for jokes.

"If you want to have a good time, Kaspar, go ahead. I can't forbid you. But when you suddenly discover your limit has run out, don't blame us."

"What limit?"

"The limit of love."

"I've never heard of any such thing."

"Then listen. It's no joking matter. Every normal man can make love only seven thousand times."

"No! " My lower lip hung down all the way to my navel. "Who reckoned that up?"

"Science says so."

"Damnation... Seven thousand, is it?"

"That's right."

"And after that it's dead calm?"

"Not a flicker."

"I like that! A hot piece of news."

"That's how it is. I wanted you to know."

Thank you kindly, I thought. Yet another puzzle of nature. One lives and lives, but surprises never seem to end. It appears I should have kept up a reckoning since my young years.

"Like Juta! " it suddenly flashed through my mind.

Had she known about that?

"Do as you see fit," said Kõll, "but I'm going home."

"Let me think a little."

I flopped down on the ground among the gooseberry bushes, where we had spent the night on our mattresses staring at the tinkling stars. And I fell to thinking.

Truth to tell, I was in two minds. I was mad at those scientists. They live in big cities, publish books and newspapers, but it never occurs to them to let people know how much loving has been apportioned them.

Damn...

But how had Kõll found out? He was a vet after all, not a regular doctor.

"Who told you this great wisdom?"

"Which one?"

"About the seven thousand."

"When I attended a refresher course in Tartu, men talked about it. I don't know who had told them."

"Must've been a brainy chap. Educated. A fool never stops to think of such things."

"Of course."

"So they reckoned it precisely, did they? Seven

thousand times."

"About seven thousand. Give and take two or three times. It doesn't really matter."

"Now here you're mistaken. Those three times are the most important ones."

"Oh, go on with you," said Kõll with a shrug.

"I'm serious. Just imagine you have only three chances left. As long as you have them you're a man, and when you don't have them, you're just a bubble of air. No use to anybody, like a teetotaller in a pub."

"I suppose you're right! "

"It's frightening, really."

"Come on, let's go. Out of temptation's way."

"I'll just sit here a while and think. You go on. Don't worry about me."

I wanted to be by myself, to do some reckoning up.

Kõll seemed easier in his mind now that he'd done his civic duty, given me medical advice.

I chewed on a gooseberry leaf and did my reckoning.

To begin with, I ticked off those ninety-nine times. That was clear enough.

As for the rest, you couldn't hope for any accuracy.

Well, there was Elmi from the Karjamaa farmstead, she was my first.

About twenty times, not more.

From Christmas till Epiphany.

Then we had a row. A good get-out-and-stay-out quarrel.

Malli from the Kungla farmstead. Once. During the haymaking at Sergi's from the Juurika farmstead.

When I went to Ruhnu to get some young firs for

piles, there was somebody there. Don't remember her name. But there was.

Then there was Juta. Ninety-nine times.

Then there was the war.

I must count myself lucky to 've remained alive, so there's no point in complaining.

No point at all.

When I came home I had no eyes for Abruka's girls. Because Juta was still firmly planted in my heart. Juta, or the memory of Juta. Which is probably the same thing.

That autumn we went cod-fishing beyond Sõrve Peninsula. I had an affair there. Not love. Simply two lonely people finding each other. Several times. The name was Luise-Amaalie.

In the winter we went to Paama to fell timber. In the evenings we used to dance to a gramophone until we dropped on our feet. I was great at waltzing, and a front-liner too. So I was a great success with the girls. Viiola sent me New Year cards several years running. One said: "*Kaspar, wonderful memories do not pale like stars at dawn.*"

That's how it was.

Nice to think of it.

Still and all I kept hoping that Juta would come back. Widows were waiting for their dead husbands, and I was waiting for Juta from Sweden.

Sometimes I would linger on the pier of an evening, sitting on the old logs and staring out at sea, thinking all the while:

"She's not so far away, just beyond this stretch of water. Maybe if I yell to her at the top of my voice she

will hear and come back. Juta is a simple village girl, what business has she in a rich kingdom?"

Oh well...

She never came back.

My yells did not help.

On a frosty night near Velikiye Luki, a wounded man yelled beside the railway tracks:

"Boys, help me! I'm Peeter Tamm! "

I had been left all alone at the station, sitting on the first floor, maintaining communication. They said it'd be the firing squad for me if I left the telephone even for a second.

And the wounded man kept yelling in the frosty mist:

"Boys! Don't let me die! I'm Peeter..."

In the endless darkness it sounded like the lament of a swan frozen into the ice. It got to the marrow of my bones. He yelled all night. Stopped towards morning.

Damn...

I should've gone after him but I was afraid of the firing squad.

That's how it was.

More sense in getting shot.

Damn.

I waited for Juta till the next spring.

In vain.

I might have waited longer, for you can't put human thoughts under lock and key. But in spring I took up with Marge—life's demands were not to be denied. The soldiers' wives were heavy with children, and in the morning all men were met on the shore by wives or girlfriends, while I stepped ashore like some beachcomb-

er. Nobody to share my heartache or my sandwich with. As though I was a poacher and not an honest fisherman. My soul craved joy.

Marge was young and pretty.

Generally, all young girls are pretty.

Marge's best feature were her large brown eyes. Neither her mother nor her father had such eyes. Marge inherited hers from some distant ancestor.

Our daughters, Luigi and Viire, don't have such eyes either. Just try and make out who they've taken after.

Yes, our first child was a girl. It's a lovely thing, a baby is. Jerking its tiny legs on your stomach, tickly as a fly. The second child was a girl too. Well, what of it? I did not mind them being girls.

Jaak from the Põllu farmstead has a houseful of girls. Six altogether. When the last one was born, Jaak wandered about the village crying and begging for a drink.

"It was a boy when it just popped out. I saw it with my own eyes. And then he shrank into a girl."

I did not cry because I was sure we were going to have a boy next time.

But no!

He hasn't been born to this day.

Life is wonderful but hard.

When Raksi was still alive, we used to go to the juniper thickets with him, lie down and look at the sky. A juniper is a wonderful shrub, and if it also has a small bottle hidden among its roots, there isn't a better plant for an aching head.

I'd lie there, gnawing a blade of grass, and I'd say to my dog, who understood every word I said:

"We are having a jolly good time here on the sly, my sober pal, looking at the heavens where your soul will go one day, and so will mine. And there we shall meet, Raksi, and it doesn't matter whether it will be in heaven or some other place. But our sons will never meet on this earth because we don't have any. It's a sad thought, isn't it, Raksi?"

And Raksi would stretch out his muzzle. He understood everything. He'd even begin to howl. *I* didn't howl. But my soul did. People couldn't hear it, but a dog could. It is quite likely that he could.

O Lord!

There, Victor's throttling down his engine. We are approaching Abruka. I'm all wet from lying here with no air, I suppose my sweat is dripping between the coffin boards. What's going to happen now, my dear villagers?

Lord Almighty!

It's nothing to me, I've been in worse fixes. But I can just imagine the look on the face of my Marge when I push the lid aside, clear my throat and wish the gathering a very good afternoon.

The whole bloody mess will be laid down at Marge's door. She ordered the coffin. It's clear enough, once you give it some thought. And what's the point of giving it any thought when I'm streaming with sweat. The dead men must have devilish patience to lie like that for years. Well, let them rest in peace, as they say.

Yes, Marge, dear wife...

Actually you're not all that bad, there are far worse

shrews about. Of course you're as thin as a rake, but that's nature's fault rather than your own. My mother used to say you were a kind of mincer. You mince food into you no worse than the others, but it gets out at the other end. Your cheeks don't get round and your body doesn't fill out because your stubbornness burns down all the calories. When you have a bout of stubbornness, you're quite a sight: you blaze all over, and not only your big brown eyes flash defiantly but all of you sparkles with obstinacy like a Christmas-tree. Honest to God! You're now listening to the women's taunts and abuse—and our women know as many strong words as the men—and you're glowing with spite and joy because you've paid me back, in this way at least, for my long absence.

"Where're you going to keep that coffin, Marge?"

"None of your business."

"I should care! Shall we come for the wake tonight?"

Silence.

What's happened to your glib tongue, wife?

"What wake? Kaspar will come back and knock this box to chips for kindling. That'll be the end of the party."

That was Luise from the Kajaka farmstead. The one who heard me fart.

Yes...

"And what I say is that as soon as Kaspar comes back and sees this gala performance, he'll turn his back and leave you there and then. And he'll never throw a

backward glance either."

Now, now... Not so fast, neighbours. Nothing like that is going to happen.

Why d'you think I'm lying meek and quiet in this coffin? Because I want to come home to Marge.

As God is my witness, I'll never leave her now. "Never throw a backward glance," indeed! Much you know! Silly womenfolk! Can't you understand that a gala performance like this can only be put on because of love?

I suppose I'd get real roaring mad if Marge suddenly changed her ways. I wouldn't be able to bear it. Something like this happened once.

But I stopped that nonsense.

Took harsh measures.

It was that last time I went to see Luigi in Tallinn. That trip, I must tell you, was something. We ate, drank, and made merry. After that I decided to keep away from Tallinn. To make sure I didn't catch some disease. What disease, you may ask?

Well, questions disease, for instance.

It's a very bad disease, let me tell you.

No sooner had I entered Luigi's office, than one of the dolls there with sooty eyebrows popped a question:

"Have you got sheepskins, Comrade?"

I had to laugh, naturally, and then I inquired if she thought sheep didn't need their skins in the country? But it seems she wasn't joking. Her face all broke out in spots, like a sick plaice. It appears it was a question of life or death to her. She wanted a sheepskin coat, if you please. So she gave me a baleful glance, as blood-

curdling as a caged wolf's. I actually shivered: had I been a sheep, she'd have skinned me there and then. And I'd never be lying in this coffin, waiting for my hour to strike (soaking wet too).

Then another young lady, her eyes painted green like she'd just escaped from a cholera barrack, asked me another question:

"Perhaps you have wool then, uncle?"

She stared at me with those green eyes of hers, like a silkworm, and tossed her head. And dangling from her ears were huge yellow eggs. I said it must be hard on the earlobes to carry that weight. At this point Luigi dragged me out into the hall and gave me a nudge in the ribs. "Really, Pops," she said, "you're a real yokel, a fossil, one might say, like a mammoth. Those huge eggs there in her ears cost all of three hundred rubles apiece. Italian earrings, that's what they are." God, one could buy a heifer for that kind of money! I buttoned up my mouth good and proper, thinking to myself: now if that isn't a hefty wench—carrying half a bull in her ears and looking out for a ram to toss on her shoulders as well! I was about to air my views, for I'd fortified myself in the bar back at the bus-station, but Luigi dragged me, a fossil mammoth that I was, away from the polite society. So we went to Mustamäe. Home. I thought of hailing a taxi, but no, Luigi made me ride in a trolley-bus. A waste of hard-earned money, she said. It was a terrible crush in that trolley-bus. The passengers stood belly pressed to belly. All my buttons were torn off. When I fought my way out, the skin on my belly had been rubbed thin and the ribs had caved in like a sprat's that's gone bad. I stood there at the

stop, taking gulps of air, if you can call it air, the stuff they breathe in the city. And Luigi there, reeking of perfume. I grumbled a bit, of course, saying she could go easier on perfume, remembering she was a plain village girl after all.

"This is French perfume, ninety rubles a bottle."

How'd you like that?

That kind of money could buy you a roof of asbestos cement for the woodshed. They say it will last thirty years and no smell at all. Of course, she couldn't afford a taxi! But the questions game did not end there.

Up at the apartment my dear son-in-law popped up under my nose, and instead of a "good day" asked me a question too:

"I say, have you got a black cat at home?"

I looked at him sadly and even laughed.

"What's the matter with the lot of you? You all seem to 've caught that questions disease."

"I ask because I want to know."

Well, I set out the Abruka goodies I brought them as a present—smoked fish, home-baked bread, wild strawberries straight from the forest and said:

"This is all I have to offer you. So don't ask me any more questions."

The son-in-law went into the other room, and Luigi started scolding me:

"As soon as you have a glassful, Pops, you get too big for your boots. It's not nice."

Perhaps it isn't.

"You mustn't drink at all."

We shall see about that.

"He asked you about a cat in all seriousness. We need a black pelt."

"What the hell for? To rub the lamps with?"

"Pops, listen first, and then you can crack all the jokes you want."

Who am I, a circus clown to crack jokes from evening to morn? I'm a serious person.

"We need the pelt of a black cat for a chest-toupee. We're going to Hungary in September, to Lake Balaton, and hairy chests are in fashion there."

"Fancy that... What next?"

"Really, Pops. My husband's chest is as bare as a new-born eel."

I puffed like the engine at the Proletary factory used to puff in the old times and asked:

"And what kind of heads are in fashion now—sane or dotty?"

I got no applause, as you can imagine.

I didn't sleep a wink that night. No, that pelt didn't worry me, but those overfed city seagulls yelled like mad over the garbage-bins all night long, and all kinds of thoughts got into my head. It was a wonder, I thought, how fast a human child could change. Luigi, like Viire, grew up on fish and spuds, we scoured them both with a juniper besom in our bath-house, and we taught them life's wisdom with the same words, yet look how different they have turned out. Viire never hung things on her ears and didn't deck herself out in peacock feathers, rain or shine. Viire always remained what she was. What a woman ought to be.

Early the next morning I made ready to go home. To spare my nerves. You could never tell what ques-

tions they'd ask next.

Luige pushed a small parcel into my bag.

"It's a present for Ma. She'll like it."

A present is all very well. At home we unwrapped the parcel and what do you think we found?

A wig, that's what. A false pelt, damn it all.

"I'm throwing this abomination into the stove! "

"But it's a present, Kaspar! "

"We don't need this kind of presents. We'll make do with our own pelts. And that's that! "

I didn't throw it into the stove, but I put it in the chest in the barn, under lock and key. Not to give Marge ideas.

I was wrong there.

One morning, coming home from the sea, what do I see—a strange head popping in our juniper thicket. The head was strange and funny, but the shoulders were familiar enough, and so was the scrawny bottom. And I knew the walk too. Wasn't it a rum to-do?

I entered our house, and Marge was not at home. There was a note for me on the table.

"*I've gone to the cemetery, today is Remembrance Day. Will be back for dinner. There's fried fish for you in the oven.*" And the note ended with a question: "*There're clouds in the sky. Will it rain?*"

Fancy asking me in a note whether it was going to rain or not! A storm warning flashed in my head. I went to the barn, and what did I see? The bottom of the chest had been prized open and the wig wasn't there. How'd you like that? I saw red, but I kept a hold on myself, didn't yell or stamp my feet, or anything, just kept repeating:

"Just you wait, just you come home, you'll get a fine thrashing. A really fine one."

I was so worked up I didn't have the patience to wait till dinner-time.

I was fair bursting with anger.

I cut down a rowan switch and thrashed a log that lay by the barn. I lashed it to strips!

After that I felt a bit better. Easier in my mind. When the false head flashed into view in the junipers I stood in the gate, legs planted far apart, and said sternly:

"If you don't pull that thing off your head this very minute, wife, you'll get such a thrashing you won't be able to sit down for three days."

That's what I said, these very words. Was I mad! And I suppose I looked it, because the false pelt was whisked off in a sec.

First I threw it into the bushes, then retrieved it and tossed into the fire.

"You're as spiky as a ruff today," Marge said with a sigh.

"I'm not spiky. But I don't want to have a false head on my wife in my age."

Marge said nothing.

She must've seen I was right.

And at supper she said:

"You're an odd one, Kaspar. Sometimes you get in a mood and never say a word to me, and another time you lash out at me and call me a wormwood besom. And when I thought I'd make myself pretty, you got so raving mad I thought you'd bite me. Why are you like this?"

Why am I like this?

I didn't try to explain it to her. I ate some yoghurt, chewed some fish and gave Raksi his dinner. Raksi was still alive then. To myself I thought:

"Whether you're a wormwood besom or a coil of barbed wire, you're also my wife and the mother of my children, a dear person, in a word. What else d'you want explained. It'd take me a whole day telling you the things I've thought and suffered living with you, and it wouldn't be any good either. Because a man's heart can never be put into words. It's impossible. That's how it is.

"On the other hand, the fact that you don't wear your heart upon your sleeve may lend strength to marriage. Perhaps, if there weren't any puzzles, there wouldn't be any love. It is quite possible. Yes."

I thought about it yesterday in Lepp's gooseberries.

And it became clear to me that I wouldn't wait for those women. Even if they were all ravishing beauties. I was going home. That's what I decided.

Home. To Marge.

Perhaps there was quite a lot left till the seven-thousand mark. And perhaps only three times. Or even two. Or one.

It didn't matter how many.

What mattered was that I had to take it all home, whatever was left. All my love. Why else should I hurry home if not because I have somebody there to share my love with. Otherwise I might as well go to Pikanina Cape, sit down on a boulder, stare at the waves and yell my head off like a sea eagle gone crazy.

"You're going home, Kaspar! " I told myself,

man to man.

"What about a tumble in the hay?" Lepp asked me, goggle-eyed. "Won't you like a session in the hay, Kaspar?"

"Some other time, Anton."

"What's the matter with you? Has somebody been at you with the moral code?"

"Nobody's been at me. I want to go home."

"You're not going anywhere, Kaspar! Men of our generation have missed quite a few things in life. It's no sin to make up for it while there's still time."

Put it on a sound basis, did he?

"You're not going, Kaspar. Let's live and make merry. We'll build such a monument to your dog that all Europe will sit up and take notice."

"Thanks."

When Lepp went back and Kõll came out on the porch, I asked him:

"Tell me, is there a thing you miss most in life?"

"Yes, there is such a thing," said Kõll, coming closer. "And I'll always miss it. Shall I tell you?"

"Tell me by all means."

"When we liberated Sõrve, about four hundred fine Ardennes horses were lying in the grass by the wood. The Germans had shot them down. They were still warm, hadn't had time to cool. Well, I'll miss those horses all my life."

I nodded.

"What about you, Kaspar?"

I didn't tell him.

I'd have to tell him about Juta, and can you compare one girl who went to Sweden with four

hundred big horses?

"I'll tell you some other time," I said. "It's a long story."

Indeed, it would've taken long to tell. I'd start about Juta, and then I'd also have to tell him about Marge and Raksi.

I gathered my traps and walked out into the street. Truth to tell, there was nowhere for me to go.

The launch for Abruka had long left. To descend on Viire with a morning-after mug did not seem like a good idea. Of course a father can see his daughter whenever he feels like it, but he must think of proprieties too.

So I made my way out of town to the fishing harbour Tori. It was empty and bleak, although the warm August night did pour balm on the soul. And again the stars spangled the sky, and the sea breathed evenly, as it always does in this season.

It was almost the same kind of night as when I was hurrying in answer to Juta's call. And had no idea what awaited me.

O Lord!

Now there was a call too. Marge's. Although it didn't have the power of Juta's, it was a call just the same.

I had done right to slip away.

I'm clean before Raksi as well.

It was for his sake that I had come to town, not for some easy lays.

I was not clear in my mind about the monument. I needed to think it over. Raksi hadn't been any old dog, he had been a special dog. When all is said and done, he

was what I had in place of a son.

O Lord.

Such things happen too.

Actually, there might have been a son. That time when I broke my leg jumping from a hay-waggon. I spent several months on my back, first in hospital and then at home, incapacitated, unable to hop off to the shop. I was as fresh and sober as a fish in the net.

There might have been a son. But there wasn't. Nature blighted our hopes. And you can't argue with Nature.

O Lord!

Then Raksi appeared. I had him with me for twelve years.

I was sitting in the old Tori harbour, beneath gentle stars, and all Raksi's life passed before my mind's eye. How he grew from a pup, no bigger than a flea, into a large handsome dog. How he learnt to ride in a motor-bike. How I read him the *Sports Newspaper* in the evenings, and the Encyclopedia too. How he saved my life. How Kõll and I operated on his leg and how he crunched Kõll's dentures to bits. How he took a gun and bravely went off into the woods.

By that time the night was on the wane: the silver of the stars had got tarnished, the sea surface had grown lighter in expectation of the dawn. I decided that the party at Lepp's house must be over. So I made my way back because where else could I go if not to my friends, when day was only breaking.

Teemeister was asleep with his head on the table. I touched him on the shoulder. He bestowed a weary glance on me and asked in a hoarse but tender voice:

"Why aren't your dear eyes smiling at me? Why don't I hear your tender voice?"

"Sleep on, pal. You'll tell me the rest tomorrow."

Lepp was in his darkroom.

"Your lady-friends didn't seem to linger, did they?" I asked.

"Some lady-friends," Anton grumbled. "They drink, chirp a bit and off they go. Without so much as a thank you."

Kõll, it appeared, had gone home as he intended.

"And where have you been, Kaspar?" Anton asked.

"Sitting on the beach. Thinking of Raksi."

"A unique dog," said Anton. "You never tire of him, day or night."

"That's true. It's exactly how it is."

Lepp stirred the photographs in the developing-tray. In the red light I saw the dear doggy face gradually taking shape, the grey left ear hanging sadly over the eye.

"The village tragedian?" Lepp asked with a smirk. "A noble personality."

"Exactly," I said with a sigh.

"Look! Why d'you turn away?"

Why did I turn away?

Perhaps I wouldn't mourn Raksi so if his end was different. Of course I can say that he took a gun and went into the forest. They all sigh and shake their heads, touched no end. A pretty tale. As though thought up by Pushkin or some other poet. But I just can't bear to look at Raksi's portrait.

"One eye seems larger than the other. Isn't that so, Kaspar?"

Is it important? The heart is important. The eyes may be as big as wheels but if there's no heart, there's nothing.

"Your head's grown all grey, Kaspar."

So it has.

"You're as grey as your dog."

Precisely. That's how it ought to be. Raksi went grey on my account and I did on his.

Raksi had many cares, and he often had to wait for hours. It is always like this with a fisherman's dog. Besides his own personal cares, Raksi was always concerned about me. From morning till night. I suppose he even thought about me when starting after some bitch in heat. Actually, I'm sure of it. As a matter of fact, there were also joys in his life. As with any living creature. But two joys were the biggest. When we came in safely during a storm. And when I rose from the steps of the shop. Those were the greatest moments in Raksi's life. He'd squeal with delight and raise his tail so high as if he wanted to dust the stars with it.

The last autumn Raksi stopped going to the pier with me, and in winter he did not accompany me to the shop. He'd only nod doubtfully when I promised, leaving:

"Two beers and a pack of cigarettes, nothing else."

It happened one evening after the New Year, when I spent more time than usual warming myself up on the steps of the shop. I love sitting there with the men, solving a world problem or two, it's much better fun than staring at the dim shadows flicking on the TV. Nobody was in much of a hurry, we had just seen the New Year in and it was pleasant to relax after the

noise and fuss of the merry-making. Penny had brought along some home-made beer and a joint of smoked venison, so it was a bit of all right. When it grew dark we moved from the steps of the shop to the hall of the House of Culture. There was no hurry. On Abruka you don't have to think of catching the last tram, you know. It was quite dark outside when Paul Kristumann went out to relieve himself and rushed back shouting:

"Kaspar, somebody is killing your dog out there! "

God, I was frightened silly. Marge had often promised to hang him on the lime-tree since I wasn't man enough to put him out of his misery. Had she finally decided to carry out her threat? It was as though a thousand legs had grown under my belly. Never before—or after—did I leave my cronies in such a hurry.

"Look at him tearing along like a Katyusha rocket!"

Tearing along I went, that's right. Because a terrible and piteous cry for help was coming from the common and soaring over Abruka like the trumpet call of the Last Judgement. Poor animal, who is tormenting you so cruelly? I ran straight for the common, crashing through the junipers and cursing all and sundry, including Marge. What's more, it was so dark I couldn't see my own hand.

"Don't cry, Raksi, I'm coming! Coming! "

But the screams didn't stop. Had it been the death cry, it would've ceased long ago. No living creature can stand pain for so long.

By a juniper bush I caught my foot on a tree-stump and fell face down in the snow. A red-hot needle

seemed to 've been thrust into my knee. The pain hit me in the head.

"I've had it," I thought. "Now all that is left us, two invalids, is to howl in unison."

And so we did, I don't know how long because I couldn't stir. I had dislocated my knee.

Then I started pushing myself along with my hands. I'd catch at a juniper bush and pull myself up, sliding on my belly over the snow. Later I found my hands were raw and the front of my coat looked as though it had been run over by a rake.

But what could I do? On the one hand, an animal was wailing for help, on the other my besotted head made me groggy. What is the trouble, old pal? Who is holding you in that vice-like grip? I pulled myself along, urged by the wails of the dog, grunting and panting and leaving a deep trail in the snow, as though a seal had crawled there.

When Raksi heard me and saw me, he screamed louder than ever. It was obvious no man had attacked him, he'd simply got stuck. And so fast he couldn't budge.

"I'm coming, Raksi, I'm coming," I panted. "Just bear up a little longer."

When I finally reached him I saw what had happened. He was an old dog, he didn't have much strength left, he had got his tail entangled in barbed wire and just couldn't pull free because one of the barbs had pierced his tail to the bone and it hurt terribly when he tugged. I released Raksi, he whined with joy, licked my hands and tried to lick my face, and I didn't have the strength to push him away.

"Go home, Raksi," I told him. "Please, go home."

But he had no intention of going. That time when I was drowning, he wouldn't leave me either, the stupid creature, he even jumped into the hole where I was, and I had to catch him by the scruff of his neck with my numbed hands and push him under water to knock some sense into him. When I let him go, he ran to the village for help like mad. And help did arrive in time, before I turned into an icicle. And again I was trying to persuade Raksi to go home for help:

"Go home, sonny. Tell Mum I'm lying here in the snow and will lie like this until you bring a sled to fetch me."

I tried to explain the situation to him, but he was an old and weak dog and he just couldn't make sense of my words. In the end I had to break off a juniper switch and threaten him with it. Raksi pulled his wounded tail between his legs and trotted off reluctantly. Still, he had the sense to go straight home, because Marge came half an hour later with the sled.

She listened to my explanations in silence. She had listened to a lot of my explanations in the course of our married life, and they didn't cut any ice with her.

"You're both fools," she concluded, "the man and the dog."

I said nothing. At home I put a compress on my knee, which was as thick as a weight-lifter's. I went to bed with the thought: "Now we are quits, Raksi and me. He saved my life, and I saved him when he came to grief."

But Marge, it appeared, hadn't had her say yet.

"If you care nothing for me, you might at least feel

ashamed before the old dog. He waits and waits for you until his eye goes blind with tears, and you just can't tear yourself away from that shop. You're a heartless person."

"You're right here," I said with a sigh. "Too bad, indeed."

"And it's time to end the animal's torment," Marge went on, unable to stop once she'd got started. "The dog is sick. We must part with him human-like."

That's how she put it: "to part with him human-like."

I turned away to the wall.

"I'm not asking you on my own account. I'm sorry for the dog."

"Don't say such things in his hearing," I said softly.

"How else can I say it. The number of times I told you, and it's no earthly use."

In the morning Raksi took a turn for the worse. It looked as though his rear had got paralysed.

"There, you see," Marge said.

"I see. But I haven't the heart. You know that very well. And my legs refuse to obey me."

"Very well," Marge said.

She called the dog into the kitchen. I could hear her offering Raksi some food, but he refused. Then I realized she was putting a rope on his neck.

"Come for a walk, Raksi..."

Marge had never walked the dog in her life.

"Marge! "

"Yes?"

"Don't you dare hang him! "

"What will you think up next? Just you lie there quietly."

The door banged shut. I called Raksi but nobody came to lick my hand. Had Marge taken the dog away without letting me take proper leave of him?

"Marge! Come back! " I yelled.

"Marge! " I hammered on the window-pane.

"Marge! Wife! Raksi! "

Suddenly a shot rang out behind the outdoor cellar.

Is a dog's end so simple and cruel? No! It can't be!

"Raksi! Raksi! D'you hear me?"

I don't remember getting out of bed, hobbling out into the yard and making my way to the big lime-tree behind the cellar: there Raksi was lying on the ground, his chest and side all bloody.

"Raksi," I sobbed. "Raksi my sonny..." And my hand patted the bloodied fur.

And a dog which was already motionless, whose blue tongue was lolling out of its mouth, a dog which did not show the least sign of life, suddenly gave a wag of its tail.

A dead dog.

It wagged its tail. For me, for Kaspar.

Marge cried out. I slumped into the red snow.

In the horrible silence I could hear the footsteps of our neighbour, who was walking off with a gun tipped down.

Towards evening half of my head turned completely white. During the night I dreamed of dead dogs who wagged their tails. By morning the other half of my head was white too.

I did not bury Raksi. I couldn't, I was afraid to touch him—what if he wagged his tail again. Marge

buried the dog, and I don't know where the grave is. I suppose it's as it should be. If I went to Raksi's grave, it might open up and the dead dog might ask me: Kaspar, why did you take leave of me *like that*?

For a long time I couldn't believe that there was no more Raksi. I'd go out into the yard in the morning and call and whistle for him. I'd listen for his panting breath to come from the junipers or the wood. There was nothing. And all the same I waited and hoped. It's a funny thing, hope. You know it's unreasonable, that there is no point in it, but before it really sinks in, this hope warms you and nurtures you and gives you strength. Just imagine—I knew only too well that he had been killed by a bullet, that he was buried in the ground—and yet I hoped.

Then I lost all interest in life. I didn't even want to go to the shop. What was the point of going there if your dog didn't see you as far as the gate, disgust written all over his face, and didn't raise his leg by the gate-post, although he probably yearned to vent his anger by letting me have it on my trouser-leg. And even if I did go there and drank beer with the men, and even though the beer tasted the same, I missed that nagging reminder that back home somebody was waiting for me with infinite patience. On mornings when we didn't go out to sea, Raksi and I used to go for a walk along the Vahase or Kõrve roads, watching the woodpeckers and the hares, and then back home to attend each to our business. Now I didn't feel like walking. I did go out on the porch, but never went any further, just stayed there until I'd smoked a couple of cigarettes. It was strange and hard to see the beauty of

nature. Because the world had not become any worse now that Raksi was gone. Of course, the world should remain forever beautiful, because there'd have been no sense in creating shoddy for so many generations, so many millions of people. So I meditated, standing in the yard of an evening, leaning against the stack of firewood but never doing a stroke of work, never chopping so much as a log. Marge understood me and for a while put up with it. But when spring came, she said:

"Kaspar, you gave ten years of your life to the dog. Isn't it time we lived together, you and I?"

"Yes, it is," I said. "And so we shall live. But first I must put up a monument to Raksi."

Perhaps I shouldn't have spoken like this to her. Perhaps I shouldn't have mentioned it to a living soul. Perhaps it should have remained my unattainable dream. Then there'd be a monument which was nobody's business, which nobody would discuss and criticize.

But I said it, and once a word is out, it flaps its wings like a partridge and, before you know it, it has already flown across the field.

"So that's how it is," said Marge, and I saw that something had gone sour inside her. When she came back from the forest after burying Raksi, she was amazingly tranquil, as though comforted. As though she had shed all her griefs and humiliations. That evening we spent a long time over supper, and I drank a small bottle. Marge drank some beer, and it was like a wake for Raksi. And we talked about him, about all of his life. We had never done it before. Nor did we ever do it again. And Marge spoke of the dog as of an

old and sick person for whom death had been a release from suffering.

"It was the right thing to happen," she said.

And not a word out of either of us about a dead dog wagging its tail when my hand touched its bloodied fur.

I decided then that for Marge's sake I'd better not mention Raksi any more, and I never did, till the day when I blurted out that idea about a monument. Two or three days passed, and one evening Marge hissed spitefully:

"All the village is talking about your folly! "

"Which folly?"

"Why, the monument, of course! "

"Let them," I said. "It's no folly either."

So I spoke, and so I thought. But Marge thought otherwise.

"Have you thought it up to needle me?"

"Come, wife, have I ever done anything just to needle you?"

"We have both gone grey on account of that dog. Enough! "

When Raksi was still alive and followed me everywhere, Marge once said:

"It's just as well that you have no son. Wouldn't it be a shame to have a child looking for you all over the village, trying to find what beer barrel you dropped anchor by?"

"Why should he've gone looking for me?" I replied. "I'm a self-reliant man, I know where I am and what I'm about."

"You may know it, but a child doesn't, he would've

gone looking for Dad."

"What's the point of talking about it. There's no child."

"And thank God there isn't! "

That was what she said, but she really said it because her heart ached. Marge is not really such a shrew, she didn't really think it was just as well we had no son. The fact was she felt guilty about failing me that time we could have had one, because Nature had put her ban on her. Once, as I was nursing Raksi after the operation, she rasped:

"Is that a job for a man?"

To which I answered:

"Of course it'd be nicer to cradle a son in my arms. But women have too much character."

I did not mean to hurt her, but she clamped shut, and later said:

"We could have had a son, Kaspar, even two sons. But things just didn't work out that way."

So it was my fault again...

What was my fault? That I am what I am? That I have the war behind my back and Juta's flight? Was it my fault that it took so long to put the collective farms back on their feet? Sure, I take a drink once in a while, the same as others. I live like everybody else. In our team only Priidu from the Liblika farmstead has never touched a bottle and is always mad at us because we take our time over our beer and he has to wait. Well, and what good did it do him? He had to go on pension before he was due because he got himself some illness from nerves. If you're alive, then stretch the accordion of life with all your might, so that there'll be

music to gladden your heart.

So that's how it was with me and Marge and Raksi, but naturally, I said nothing about it to my cronies at the Lepp's. Had I told them everything the way it was, they'd probably have a different idea about Raksi's monument. One of them would've probably said that we couldn't put up a monument to Raksi alone. We must have one for the three of us.

Perhaps that would be right too. I don't know. Life is a tricky thing. There are not many simple and undeniable facts in it, such, for instance, as the sunrise or the sea surf. As for me, I wouldn't mind being with Raksi in that monument, but Marge would never agree. She'd rather drown herself, run out into the sea until the waves covered the top of her head than agree to be in the same monument with Raksi and me. As a matter of fact, it'd be a fine monument. She, Raksi and I. The way we are. And no need to adorn anybody with a black cat's pelt. It'd be a hell of a monument!

Anton fished Raksi's photo out of the fixing solution and hung it up to dry.

He said:

"Forgive me, Kaspar, but you are terribly alike, you and Raksi."

"Sure we are. That's as it should be."

Anton laughed. Then he said:

"Are you afraid of women?"

"I'm not afraid of women, Anton. But I have a wife of my own at home."

"Who you love very much, is that it?"

"Sure. Listen here..."

"I suppose you want to tell me another fairy tale."

"No."

"What do you want to tell me then? The story of your great love?"

"That's right. As I walked here just now from the sea shore under the dimming stars I cast my mind around. A life spent together, a love shared—it is the same as an old trusty pair of oars. One just can't part with such oars. Perhaps they're no longer strong, their blades have worn thin, there are hollows from the oarlocks... You take these oars in your hands and you feel through your palms the play of the waves that have rolled by and the songs of the winds that have swept past. You're afraid to work these oars too hard because you know the wood is brittle, but each creak of the oarlocks awakens sweet pain in you, and you go easy on the oars and on yourself, because this particular pair will never occur again as long as the world stands. When you come back from the sea, you put your trusty companions under the shed, and each time you walk past you throw a tender glance at the whitened wood where each layer reminds you of the life you have lived, the waves you have overpowered, the winds that have blown over you. You can never throw these oars away."

That's what I said to Anton, and then I said goodbye and hit the road to Roomassaare. Dew was sparkling on the junipers on both sides of the road, birds were twittering and the forest loomed blue on Abruka across the channel. I enjoyed walking, and soon my back became hot with sweat.

I remembered how Mother baked a fish pie for me when I was leaving for the war. She put it in my knapsack, hot, just out of the oven, and as I walked the pie first burned my back, but with every step the back felt cooler, and the pain in my heart hotter.

And now my back was growing warmer, but I felt warm at heart too. It's fine to be going home, whatever you say.

Yes, it is.

Puff-puff, pshhh...

Silence.

The engine has grown silent. So we've arrived. On Abruka. Ugh! I've sweated a puddle fit for the ducks to swim in. What's going to happen now?

"Victor, will you help me carry this coffin?" That's Marge.

"No I won't! "

"Who will help me then?"

"It's your foolishness, do what you like about it."

"Let her have it, Victor! "

"It's not right that a coffin should be in the people's way."

"Let it rot here! Let everybody know what sort of hag you are! "

Poor Marge. My poor wife. Everybody is up in arms against you.

"It would be a different matter if Kaspar were inside it."

"Let's throw the damn thing overboard! Now pick up the other end, girls! "

"Wait! I paid fifty rubles for it! "

It's time to act.

Can't tarry any more.

I'll open my mouth politely and, lifting the lid of the coffin, will say calmly and reasonably:

"Here I am. Hello, dear wife! Hello, dear villagers! "

And what happens afterwards, I'll tell you another time.

About the Authors

MUKHTAR AUEZOV (1897-1961)

The founding father of contemporary Kazakh prose, Lenin Prize winner, Mukhtar Auezov lived a full and colourful life. He was a man of rare, truly encyclopedic knowledge. Not only a writer, but an outstanding researcher, academician, and prominent public figure, Mukhtar Auezov is known as the author of many stories, plays and the novel *Abai*. "Fierce Grey" numbers among the best short stories of Kazakh and Soviet literature as a whole.

REGĪNA EZERA (b. 1930)

Regīna Ezera, a People's Writer of Latvia, a Merited Worker of Culture, the winner of several republican literary prizes, is the author of several novels, short novels and numerous short stories to which she mainly owes her popularity. Her principal concern is the inner world of our contemporary, and her heroes are distinguished by sensitivity and kindness which also extend to nature and animals. The lyricism and gentle humour, typical to Regīna Ezera, are fully in evidence in the short story included in this collection.

YURI KAZAKOV (1927-1982)

A major Soviet writer Yuri Kazakov earned wide popularity in the Soviet Union for his short stories which are also published in many countries abroad. His distinctive feature is emotional psychologism, and his plots are based on moral conflicts. Kazakov's lyrico-philosophical perception of Nature is strikingly manifest in "Arcturus, the Hound", one of his best-known stories.

ORALKHAN BOKEYEV (b. 1944)

Taking his place in Kazakh literature in the seventies, Oralkhan Bokeyev quickly won broad popularity among readers of all republics of the Soviet Union. His heroes are our contemporaries: shepherds, hunters, dwellers of mountain auls. Oralkhan Bokeyev writes with affection of his native Altai, of the beauty of its mountains and gorges. The writer's prominent theme is the world of nature, which coexists with man and suffers his influence. Continuing the traditions of Kazakh prose, Oralkhan Bokeyev has written several excellent short stories about animals, one of which is now presented for the reader's consideration.

YULIA DRUNINA (b. 1924)

Yulia Drunina is a popular poetess, the author of many books of verse. Her lyrical poetry is largely nur-

tured by memories of the Second World War, in which she took part as a field nurse. Many of her poems are meditations on the destinies of her generation. Whether writing of the past or the present, Drunina treasures, above all, generosity of heart, kindness and sensitive concern for "every living thing" and "every blade of grass". This is also the theme of her short novel *Alice*.

DZHUMA AKHUBA (b. 1937)

A native of a small village in Northern Caucasus, Dzhuma Akhuba has become one of today's most well-known Abkhazian writers. His first works appeared in 1954, following his graduation from Moscow's Maxim Gorky Literary Institute. In recent years he has gained broad popularity as the author of many short novels and stories. Problems of morality often receive a pointed, dramatic treatment in Dzhuma Akhuba's works. All of this is present in the story "Bzou", which won the prize of the journal *Druzhba narodov* for the best prosaic work of 1971.

NORA ARGUNOVA (b. 1922)

Nora Argunova has had an eventful life. She fought in the Second World War and afterwards became a journalist. Many of her press publications and books are devoted to animals. She has visited many wild-nature preserves in the Soviet Union and made friends with people who, like herself, are dedicated to the cause of

protecting the riches of Nature. The hero of her story "A Labour of Love" is a real person.

MUSA MURATALIYEV (b. 1942)

The Kirghiz prose writer Musa Murataliyev belongs to the generation of young writers who came into popularity in the mid-seventies. He writes novellas and short stories which deal with the contemporary rural and city life of Kirghizia. The writer is also drawn to the past with the complexity of its events and moral problems. Musa Murataliyev's works also reflect the traditional interest of Kirghiz prose writers in nature and the rare animal world which abounds in the region—one of the most interesting nature preserves in the country is located in the Kirghiz Republic. The short story "Trust" touches upon today's very important and extremely delicate problem of man's relations with wildlife.

YANKA BRYL (b. 1917)

The prominent Byelorussian prose writer Yanka Bryl, a State Prize winner and author of many novels, short and long stories, essays and miniatures, was a participant in the partisan struggle in Byelorussia during the Second World War, and many pages of his books refer to the grim years of the war against the nazi invasion. Among the stories, connected in one way or another with the difficult war years, there are

a number of magnificent, lyrical miniatures about animals. One of them has been included into this collection.

VLADIMIR SANGHI (b. 1935)

Vladimir Sanghi is the renowned author of many novellas and short stories about the life of the Nivkh people of the North, the small ethnic group to which he himself belongs. He writes both of the distant past of the Nivkhs, their ancient customs, traditions and art, and of contemporary life in the North today. But perhaps a special current in the writer's work is formed of tales, legends, and miracle-filled miniatures which relate to the contemporary reader about the nature of this special region and of the deep bond the Nivkh has with the animal world which surrounds him, a bond which has been carried down over the centuries and has inculcated in the Nivkh people a respect for life in its most varied manifestations.

BAKHROM FIRUZ (b. 1939)

The Tajik writer Bakhrom Firuz was born in the Samarkand Region into the family of a schoolteacher. In 1962, he graduated from the philological department of the Leninabad State Teachers' Training College and took up journalism. Today Bakhrom Firuz is a poet and prose writer. In recent years he has been particularly involved with short story writing. His nov-

ellas and short stories deal basically with the life of today's youth. The writer is deeply concerned with problems of morality and ethics. In this respect, the short story included in our collection is quite typical of Bakhrom Firuz's work. Purity of thought and feeling, decency and honesty, goodness and loyalty—these are the things which the author calls for.

RIMANTAS BUDRIS (b. 1930)

The Lithuanian prose writer Rimantas Budris began to publish his works in 1947. After graduating from the department of philology and history of Vilnius University, he enrolled in the department of biology of the same university. The uniqueness of such a "double" education influenced the "profile" of the future writer. Rimantas Budris writes chiefly of nature and wildlife. The author of many books of sketches and short stories, Budris is a winner of the Vytautas Mickevičius-Kapsukas Prize of the Union of Journalists of Lithuania.

YURI NAGIBIN (b. 1920)

Yuri Nagibin, the renowned master of contemporary Soviet prose, published his first short story in 1940. The fledgling writer's literary activities were cut short by the advent of World War II, and he volunteered for the front and became a wartime correspondent for the newspaper *Trud*. In the years that followed the writer perfected his talent and established his reputation as an

author with an extraordinarily broad thematic range. Yuri Nagibin writes about the Soviet people's struggle against fascism during the Second World War, about contemporary life, about childhood and children, about major figures in Russian culture, about his rich travel experiences, about hunting and nature, about wildlife and its beauty and harmony which are so important to man. One of such recent short stories is included in this collection.

ANATOLI SEVASTYANOV (b. 1939)

The hero of Anatoli Sevastyanov's short story "My Friend the Bear" (excerpts from which have been included in our collection), young Muscovite Victor Medvedev, dreams of becoming a biologist and studying bears in their natural habitat. He sends a letter to the director of the preserve on the Kamchatka Peninsula asking for work of any kind. He is taken on as a worker in the research section. And so Victor Medvedev finds himself on the Kamchatka and begins to carry out his observations and take down notes on the bears' behaviour. We have deliberately rested on the subject of the short story both in order to help the reader, and to relate somewhat about the author. The fact is that the short story is to a great extent autobiographical. Before entering the literary profession, Anatoli Sevastyanov studied wildlife quite extensively. And it is no accident that the short story bears the subtitle "Notes of a Wildlife Expert". The author's personal experience, his first-hand knowledge of the

taiga, and the documentary nature of his narrative are a fascinating aspect of this work.

JÜRI TUULIK (b. 1940)

Jüri Tuulik, an Estonian prose writer, was born on the island of Abruka, which lies off the Estonia's coast in the Baltic Sea and, for reasons of the specific weather conditions, is sometimes isolated from the mainland for months on end. This circumstance, which has been a butt of jokes in Estonia since olden times, probably contributed to the development of the special Abrukan brand of humour, which is very pronounced in Jüri Tuulik's works. His literary debut was a short story. Jüri Tuulik's first collection of short stories was published in 1966. Although he also writes plays for the theatre and the radio, Jüri Tuulik largely owes his popularity with the reading public to his stories about the life of fishermen on Abruka. His work is rooted in the traditional lore and constitutes a vivid page in modern Estonian short-story writing.

REQUEST TO READERS

Raduga Publishers would be glad to have your opinion of this book, its translation and design and any suggestions you may have for future publications.

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